

## Written Answers.

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The following are questions tabled by Members for written response and the ministerial replies as received on the day from the Departments [unrevised].

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*Questions Nos. 1 to 6, inclusive, answered orally.*

### **Taoiseach's Meetings and Engagements**

7. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Taoiseach if he will report on his most recent dialogues with the Government and President of the United States of America. [43329/20]

**The Taoiseach:** I had a call with President-elect Biden after his victory in the November election in which I offered my congratulations to him and to Vice President-elect Harris. We discussed the great value we both attach to warm and close bilateral relations, the importance of protecting the Good Friday Agreement and the US's unwavering support for the peace process. We also discussed the value of multilateralism in tackling global issues.

I also sent a message of congratulations to President Biden and Vice President Harris as they took up their respective offices in January.

Our respective officials are working to ensure that appropriate arrangements are put in place to allow us to mark St Patrick's Day together with our friends in the US, as is the tradition, even though Covid19 means that in-person meetings will not be possible this year.

I have had no recent contact with former President Donald Trump.

*Questions Nos. 8 to 36, inclusive, resubmitted.*

*Questions Nos. 37 to 44, inclusive, answered orally.*

### **Broadband Infrastructure**

45. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to ensure broadband accessibility for all students to facilitate online learning at home throughout the Covid-19 restrictions in view of primary and secondary schools remaining closed for January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1420/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I recognise how vital telecommunications services are to citizens for so many aspects of their daily lives, including remote working, studying and staying in touch with family members during the Covid-19 crisis. 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.

In April 2020, all major telecommunications providers in Ireland committed to a number

of measures to help people stay in touch and work from home during the pandemic. Since then, a number of operators have implemented further supports for consumers, including students in education, who require a high data usage package, by increasing data limits on many existing packages and introducing new packages with very high, or unlimited data offerings. Consequently, the market for mobile packages with very high, or unlimited data offerings, is becoming increasingly competitive, which is a positive development for consumers.

Those commitments were further supported through regulations made under the Wireless Telegraphy Act 1926, for a ComReg framework proposal enabling temporary release of additional radio spectrum rights of use. Ministerial consent was granted for this proposed providing flexibility for mobile network operators to create additional capacity for mobile phone and broadband services and accommodating increased demand arising from Covid 19 related remote working and studying. Three-month licences were issued to three mobile network operators and were renewed on a number of occasions most recently to 1 April 2021.

In addition, ComReg recently published an alert on its website to help increase awareness of the unlimited data packages entitled: “Looking for mobile unlimited data plans for remote school or college?”

Finally, as of March 3rd, 287 publicly accessible Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) have been delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under the National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention. High speed broadband services are being switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development.

*Question No. 46 answered orally.*

### **National Broadband Plan**

47. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when premises in the intervention areas will receive high speed fibre broadband; if there is a timetable for the roll-out in these areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13081/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Design work is complete or ongoing under the National Broadband Plan in target townlands across every county in Ireland with nearly 187,000 premises surveyed as of 3 March 2021.

This survey work is feeding into detailed designs for each deployment area and the first fibre to the home connections have been made in Carrigaline, Co Cork and in Cavan. Technical testing and validation continues prior to a wider release of the area. I am advised by NBI that build works are continuing across the country in 11 Deployment Areas, including a total of 45,000 premises, and “make ready” work is underway in a further 18 Deployment Areas that include a further 64,688 premises.

The Covid 19 pandemic has had an impact on the delivery of the fibre network resulting in delays on delivery of aspects of the programme. Impacts include challenges with mobilisation of key contractors with restrictions on operations, supply chain and logistic delays both nationally and internationally, as well as the recruitment of key personnel as NBI and its contractors scale up, including challenges associated with on-boarding and training people. The extent of this impact is currently being assessed and NBI has committed to put in place measures to mitigate the impact in as far as possible.

I am advised that NBI are working to provide greater functionality and more detail on their website with a rolling update of network build plans.

### **Environmental Policy**

48. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if his attention has been drawn to a report (details supplied) which ranks Ireland last in the environment index and 13th in the climate action index out of 15 high income EU countries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12890/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Sustainable Progress Index report is a critical reminder that Ireland needs to do more in order to progress climate and environmental goals. I acknowledge that to achieve these objectives will require fundamental changes in how we live our lives. The Programme for Government places climate action and environmental sustainability at the centre of the Government's policy agenda.

The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill, to be published shortly, will significantly strengthen the statutory climate governance framework to support achieving our climate objectives. I am also currently leading the preparation of the 2021 Climate Action Plan, which will set out actions that must be taken across every sector in order to ensure we deliver on our commitments. To inform the next Plan, I will shortly launch a public consultation, complemented by a strengthened National Dialogue on Climate Action to create enduring structures for citizen engagement and activation on climate change across all of society.

I also recently launched a public consultation on the introduction of a nationwide ban on smoky fuels, which when finalised will improve air quality delivering our environmental targets, but will also provide significant health benefits, improving quality of life and our overall well-being.

The Sustainable Progress Index report highlighted New Zealand's Wellbeing Budget. I would note that Ireland is also taking concrete steps in this area and work is underway to deliver the Programme for Government commitment to develop new measures of well-being and progress, recognising that in order to achieve a well-rounded policy-making system there is a pressing need to move beyond uniquely economic measures. Work is also progressing across Government to mainstream the approach to equality budgeting, further illustrating the commitment to inform policy beyond economic values. These will be important developments as we move to advance our implementation of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

This year, my Department will also lead the development of Ireland's second SDG National Implementation Plan to further guide implementation and promote awareness of the Goals. It is important to emphasise that meeting Ireland's commitments under the SDGs will entail ambition across Government and wider society. In this regard, the SDG Stakeholder Forum, established under the first SDG Plan, will continue to provide a further interface between the public bodies and civil society to inform the next Plan and support our collective work to deliver the SDGs.

### **Energy Efficiency**

49. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communi-

cations if he will report on the work of his Department to support households in maintaining warm homes, important for reasons of good health in particular through retrofitting and energy efficiency measures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1496/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Retrofitting of homes supports good physical and mental health by creating healthy indoor living environments with healthy air temperatures, humidity levels, noise levels, and improved air quality.

My Department funds a number of SEAI grant schemes to support homeowners to improve the energy efficiency of their properties. These schemes offer partial grants for individuals who can afford to contribute to the cost of upgrades as well as free energy efficiency improvements for people at risk of energy poverty.

Since 2000, over 400,000 homeowners have upgraded their homes with support from these schemes. This has resulted in warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes that are easier and cheaper to heat and light.

The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set ambitious targets to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2/cost optimal and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings over the next 10 years. Achieving these targets will allow many more households to reap health benefits associated with warm, energy efficient homes.

SEAI grant schemes will be a central element of the Government's approach to achieving our national retrofit targets. €221.5 million in capital funding has been provided this year for residential and community retrofit programmes. Of this allocation, €109 million is provided to support people vulnerable to energy poverty to retrofit their homes. This allocation will kick-start the first phase of our retrofit plan. A further €65 million has been provided for retrofitting the social housing stock through the Vote of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. It is intended to publish a National Retrofit Framework later this year following publication of the National Development Plan.

*Question No. 50 answered orally.*

*Question No. 51 answered orally.*

## **Greenhouse Gas Emissions**

52. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the way in which Ireland performed in 2020 as per the programme for Government commitment to achieve an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions over the next ten years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1417/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) prepares inventories of past greenhouse gas emissions for Ireland on an annual basis. Inventories are compiled by the EPA according to international standards to meet EU and UN reporting obligations and to inform national policy development.

The EPA, together with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland recently released a report entitled 'The impact on 2020 greenhouse gas emissions of COVID-19 restrictions'. The report gives a first indication of Ireland's 2020 emissions and projects they will be 6% below emissions in 2019. Emissions from the transport sector have seen the largest fall and are esti-

mated to have reduced by almost 17% from 2017 levels. On the other hand, emissions from the residential sector are estimated to have increased by 9% in 2020, as many people have been working from home. The report also states that focusing on climate action as part of a green recovery stimulus offers the opportunity to rebuild our economy, generate new jobs and respond to climate change. This is in line with Government policy.

The Programme for Government has a Green New Deal for Ireland as a core mission. It commits to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030 - a 51% reduction over the decade - and to achieving net zero emissions by 2050, the latter being consistent with EU 2050 ambition. I have supported increased climate ambition at EU level through the European Green Deal, while asserting the importance of cost-effectiveness and fairness across Member States in pursuit of increased ambition. The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill, which I will shortly take to Government for approval to publish following pre-legislative scrutiny, will significantly strengthen the governance structure in supporting Ireland's response to climate breakdown, including achieving our 2030 climate goals.

### **Environmental Policy**

53. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he has taken action to protect the Kerry International Dark Sky Reserve, the only gold reserve in the northern hemisphere, from light pollution and other forms of interference. [13092/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** There is currently no legislation in Ireland dealing specifically with environmental light pollution, and my Department has no role in this regard. I am advised that the amount of light that might emanate from a proposed development is considered in assessing individual planning applications on a case by case basis. However there is no specific national strategy in place in relation to 'light pollution' under environmental legislation.

The designation by the International Dark-Sky Association of 700 square kilometres on the Iveragh Peninsula, County Kerry, as the first International Dark Sky Reserve in Ireland has been a significant addition to the county's rich tourism profile.

I understand that the Deputy is concerned with the potential impact of a pilot communications antennae project in the Black Valley area of Kerry. I further understand that officials at the Department of Rural and Community Development 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.

The company was provided with the contact details for the Local Authority Broadband Officers by the Department of Rural and Community Development. They also addressed the monthly Broadband Officers network meeting on 25 February 2021.

The decision to proceed with the pilot is a matter for the relevant Local Authority and my Department has had no role in the matter.

### **Post Office Network**

54. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will consider introducing a public service obligation to help sustain the nationwide post office sector. [13093/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** 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 last 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 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. I met with representatives of the Irish Postmasters' Union last week to discuss the future of the network and how Government can support its continued viability.

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. As a first step, Government noted the Offline Services Report this week and agreed to establish an Inter-Departmental Group co-chaired by my Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to examine the feasibility of directing more Government business to the post office network; that Group will report back to Government by the end of July.

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

### **Mobile Telephony Services**

55. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the engagement with mobile phone operators in relation to roaming charges post-Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1332/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** EU "Roam Like at Home" in effect since 15 June 2017, provides Irish and EU consumers with the ability to use their mobile devices, within other EU countries, at domestic rates, subject to Fair Use Policy. The regulation covers data services, voice and SMS.

Albeit that the "Roam Like at Home" has functioned well to date, in order to ensure market certainty and to minimise regulatory burden, the European Commission published a new proposal in February, to prolong the existing approach in relation to caps, derogations and fair use policy for a period of ten years, allowing for possible wholesale caps adjustment in 2026. From a consumer's perspective, the revised regulation should improve quality of services when roaming, avoid bill shocks in terms of value added services while abroad, as well as ensure that consumers get access to emergency services like at home.

ComReg the independent telecoms regulator, is responsible for ensuring all providers meet relevant obligations in areas such as roaming alerts. ComReg also has information for customers in relation to roaming on their website.

My Department is in ongoing contact with industry and with ComReg and following Brexit, no changes in consumers' experience of using their mobile phone on the island of Ireland have been reported. While this is primarily a commercial matter for industry, operators have indicated they have no plans to change current arrangements and are continuing to apply the current roam like at home regime from January 2021 onwards. Going forward the situation will continue to be monitored.

### **Greenhouse Gas Emissions**

56. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to reduce emissions from the dairy farming sector as part of Ireland's efforts to reach an average of 7% reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions given the State-led intensification of dairy farming has led to higher methane and nitrous oxide emissions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1419/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Climate Action Plan 2019 sets out a range of emissions reduction targets for the agriculture sector.

The Marginal Abatement Cost Curve, or MACC, produced by Teagasc has identified the most cost-effective pathway to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in Irish agriculture for the commitment period 2021 to 2030. In order to achieve our current EU 2030 emissions reduction target, the agricultural sector will need to achieve the full abatement potential identified in the MACC, which is an average abatement of 1.85 MtCO<sub>2</sub>eq. per year from 2021 to 2030.

The step change in climate ambition set out in the Programme for Government will need to be reflected appropriately in the next iteration of the Climate Action Plan. Far reaching policy changes will be developed across every sector, including agriculture and the dairy industry, including:

- Building on Ireland's relative carbon efficiency in food production and ensuring the delivery of the measures identified by Teagasc to the fullest extent possible.

- Transforming the scale of organic farming, with delivery of a fair price for farmers at its heart.

- Developing a new strategy to expand afforestation, particularly Close to Nature Forestry and agro-forestry.

- Evaluating the potential role of sustainable bioenergy.

- Introducing a transformational programme of research and development, to ensure Ireland is at the cutting edge of scientific and technological innovation, including in the bioeconomy; marine sequestration; improving agriculture breeding programmes; feed additives to reduce biogenic methane; agroforestry; paludiculture; and nutrient management.

Land-use offers significant potential to sequester additional carbon and provide a new source of family farm income and rural economic benefit. While the achievement of such improvements is not addressed in current EU policy, the Programme for Government commits

to seeking to incentivise land use in the European Green Deal and broader EU policy. It also commits to evaluating the potential contributions towards our climate ambition from land-use improvements and set in train the development of a land-use plan, based on these findings.

It is important that the next Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) protects farm incomes and sectoral supports consistent with these objectives, and that the National Economic Plan and NDP Review frontloads investment that is directly aligned with our climate ambition.

## **Waste Management**

57. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will consider promoting a scheme to have on-street compostable bins put in place as the value of compostable beverage cups is being lost when they go into the normal litter stream for incineration. [1493/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** While the provision of such on-street infrastructure is primarily a matter for Local Authorities I am determined to address the issue of waste arising from this source.

A central theme of the Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy which I launched last September was to promote behavioural change to prevent waste arising in the first instance thus promoting the concept of a zero-waste future. In this regard the plan contains specific measures for dealing with the 22,000 coffee cups that are disposed of daily in Ireland. Over the lifetime of the plan, and working with a range of stakeholders, we will seek to eliminate this particular waste stream through a number of specific actions including:

- introducing a levy on single use coffee cups,
- trialling their elimination entirely in selected towns, Higher Education Institutions and other transport and commercial centres,
- introducing measures to ban their unnecessary use (eg. in sit-in locations) and obliging retailers to give a price reduction to consumers who use reusable cups,
- an eventual full ban on single-use disposable cups, including those made from compostable materials.

## **Proposed Legislation**

58. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if clarification will be provided in relation to the proposed Marine Planning and Development Management Bill; his plans to set up a State or semi-State body to harvest off-shore wind energy for the benefit of the State and to all of its climate targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13281/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The enactment of the Marine Planning and Development Management Bill (MPDM) will provide a modern, up-to-date regulatory and marine planning framework for offshore renewable

energy (ORE) developments beyond the limits of the foreshore, with flexibility in terms of the State's involvement in the deployment of ORE to allow for a gradual transition from a more decentralised / developer-led regime towards a more centralised / plan-led regime.

Development of the Bill is being led by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, with my Department leading the development of provisions specific to offshore renewable energy. The General Scheme was approved by Government in December 2019. The Bill underwent pre-legislative scrutiny in November / December 2020 and the report of the Joint Oireachtas Committee was laid before the Houses on the 16th of February. Consideration of the report and recommendations is currently in progress.

The electricity generation market in Ireland, the Single Electricity Market (SEM), is liberalised and open to both state-owned and private enterprises to compete in line with the requirements of the EU internal energy market. As such, while state-owned bodies may own and operate offshore wind developments, these bodies do so on a commercial basis. ESB is already involved in a number of ventures in offshore wind generation asset development. In order to avoid undermining the competitive principles of the I-SEM, the State does not directly own or operate, or plan to own or operate, any such generation assets.

Instead, to progress towards the Programme for Government commitment of 5GW of installed offshore wind capacity by 2030, my department is developing the terms and conditions of the Offshore Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (Offshore RESS). The Offshore RESS will be the means for supporting offshore wind developments via a competitive auction based framework.

*Question No. 59 answered orally.*

### **Environmental Policy**

60. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the policy in relation to the replacement of solid fuels as peat is being phased out. [13078/21]

90. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the way in which he plans to address the concerns of households that rely on solid fuels for their heating while also recognising the need to improve air quality; if he has examined new schemes that can help such households transition to cleaner heating sources; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13264/21]

113. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when he expects to finalise and implement the solid fuel regulation following the public consultation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13277/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 60, 90 and 113 together.

Each year 1,300 people die prematurely in Ireland due to solid fuel burning. I am committed to addressing this critical public health and environmental challenge through a nationwide ban on smoky coal and enhanced regulation of other solid fuels.

We have taken the first step in this process by launching a public consultation, to ask for views on how we regulate all solid fuels that contribute to air pollution. There are no proposals to ban the use of peat, wood or briquettes - the objective is to reduce the level of emissions

associated with burning these fuels through enhanced regulation and to protect human health.

In order to ensure that the system we put in place is as legally robust and as informed as possible, regulations will be introduced once the findings of the consultation have been fully considered and the required regulatory processes completed.

I am conscious that for some householders, burning solid fuel is the main or only way they have of heating their homes. The goal over the lifetime of this Government is to provide support to retrofit these homes and, in the interim, to ensure they can be heated in a way that improves public health. This is being supported by an allocation of €221 million for home and community retrofitting provided for in Budget 2021. This 82% increase on the 2020 budget is being funded through carbon tax revenue and includes €109 million in additional supports for low income homes.

### **Air Pollution**

61. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the analysis his Department or agencies under the aegis of his Department have carried out into the direct and indirect health costs to the State of burning petrol and diesel at ground level across Ireland and in particular in Galway city; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12889/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As part of its on-going research funding, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is supporting research at Trinity College Dublin into the impact of nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) on health, with particular emphasis on vulnerable groups. NO<sub>2</sub> is primarily a pollutant generated by traffic, and this study seeks to establish appropriate data which can determine the correlation between NO<sub>2</sub> levels and the prescribing of drugs used to treat asthma and chronic obstructive airways disease.

The EPA has also recently published the results of a separate study, “Particulate Matter from Diesel Vehicles: Emissions and Exposure”. This report considers the contribution of diesel and petrol vehicles to the level of PM<sub>2.5</sub> emissions in Dublin, and so is a valuable gauge in assessing the extent to which health problems caused by PM<sub>2.5</sub> may be associated with such vehicles.

Last year the European Public Health Alliance completed a study on the health costs of air pollution in European cities, and the linkage with transport, which focused on 432 cities across all Member States, including both Dublin and Cork cities. The report quantified and valued pollution-related health impacts, concluding that the total annual per capita cost is €836 in Dublin, and €756 in Cork. The overall average per capita cost across the EU was €1,276 per annum.

An initial report on the work of the Urban Transport-Related Air Pollution Working Group which is jointly chaired by my Departments will also be published shortly, and will include a range of recommendations to further address transport-related emissions.

### **National Broadband Plan**

62. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the percentage of intervention areas in counties Longford and Westmeath under the national broadband plan which have had surveys completed to date; and the percentage that remain awaiting a survey. [13083/21]

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

I propose to take Question Nos. 62, 159, 160 and 161 together.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the over 544,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools. The deployment plan forecasts construction commenced in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) that, as of 24 February, over 180,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. A breakdown of information sought in the Questions is set out in the table below.

COUNTY	number of premises in the IA	surveys completed	% surveys completed	% surveys underway or planned
Carlow	8,158.	7,772.	95%	5%
Cavan	16,242.	3,738.	23%	77%
Clare	22,592.	3,556.	16%	84%
Cork	79,424.	18,403.	23%	77%
Donegal	32,373.	6,389.	20%	80%
Dublin	13,429.	2,437.	18%	82%
Galway	38,714.	14,914.	39%	61%
Kerry	26,905.	16,382.	61%	39%
Kildare	13,859.	2,818.	20%	80%
Kilkenny	18,300.	5,951.	33%	67%
Laois	12,510.	5,565.	44%	56%
Leitrim	11,595.	3,576.	31%	69%
Limerick	21,231.	8,583.	40%	60%
Longford	8,698.	3,294.	38%	62%
Louth	8,344.	7,845.	94%	6%
Mayo	36,495.	6,895.	19%	81%
Meath	19,592.	3,981.	20%	80%
Monaghan	15,282.	7,421.	49%	51%
Offaly	12,194.	1,275.	10%	90%
Roscommon	19,126.	3,591.	19%	81%
Sligo	14,845.	3,959.	27%	73%
Tipperary	29,759.	8,643.	29%	71%
Waterford	15,000.	6,351.	42%	58%
Westmeath	11,721.	8,656.	74%	26%
Wexford	22,430.	11,231.	50%	50%
Wicklow	15,350.	8,285.	54%	46%
TOTAL	544,168.	181,511.	33%	67%

**Air Quality**

63. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of Ireland's first clean air strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44950/20]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department is currently working to finalise Ireland's first National Clean Air Strategy. While it was originally my intention to launch the Strategy alongside a public consultation on a new solid fuel regulation for Ireland, recognising the urgency of taking action to address the health impacts of domestic solid fuel burning, I have chosen to progress the development of enhanced solid fuel regulations in advance. This decision will also allow submissions received during the public consultation process to inform and contribute to the final strategy document.

The Strategy will identify and promote the integrated measures and actions across Government that are required to reduce air pollution and promote cleaner air, while delivering on wider national objectives.

In line with the Programme for Government, the Clean Air Strategy will also support the following measures:

- establishing a regional approach to air quality and noise enforcement;
- developing a multi-agency approach to clamping down on the sale of high-sulphur content fuel imported from the UK, with Local Authorities and the Revenue Commissioners;
- investing in our network of monitoring stations, to provide scientific evidence of air quality across different parts of the country, including real-time and localised air quality information; and
- moving towards a full nationwide residential solid fuel regulation.

There are a number of national policy frameworks already in place which will also help to reduce pollutant emissions and improve air quality, such as the Climate Action Plan and the National Energy and Climate Plan. It is important that synergies are maximised between these plans and the Clean Air Strategy, with a view to achieving lasting reductions in the health and environmental impacts of air pollution.

### **Post Office Network**

64. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the engagement he has had with An Post regarding its capacity to deliver banking services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13246/21]

69. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the types of services that An Post can deliver into the future in order that it can continue to make a significant contribution to communities across Ireland. [13296/21]

94. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will report on the potential to make public service obligation applicable to the post office network; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13275/21]

116. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will enact legislation to reflect the Private Members motion previously passed on 16 November 2016 regarding the future of the post office network as a matter of urgency to ensure the sustainability of the existing community post office network; and if he will make a

statement on the matter. [38662/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 64, 69, 94 and 116 together.

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 and of the importance of maintaining a post office network in our society.

In the four years since the Private Members' motion referred to was debated, a lot of work has been done to ensure An Post and the post office network remain viable.

An Post put in place a Strategic Plan, covering the period 2017 – 2021, in response to the structural challenges faced by the postal sector.

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

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

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

As part of its commercial strategy to increase banking services An Post last 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 over 900 post offices nationwide. This follows the announcement by Bank of Ireland 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.

With regard to the community banking model a project team comprising officials from the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Department of Finance was established to progress that particular issue. The final report was published by the respective Ministers on 4 July 2018. The report indicated that the Department of Finance would continue to engage in dialogue with Irish Rural Link and other stakeholders and that it would commission an independent external evaluation of the possibility or otherwise for promotion of the local public banking concept in Ireland. That further report was published by the Department of Finance in December 2019 and concluded that there is no business case for the State to establish a public banking system in Ireland, supporting the outcome of the July 2018 report.

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

Government believes An Post has untapped potential to do more and make a further signifi-

cant 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.

## **National Broadband Plan**

**65. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the degree to which his Department continues to monitor the progress in the delivery of broadband in urban and rural areas throughout the country having particular regard to the increased reliance on electronic communications given the necessity to work from home; if he is satisfied that the progress to date is adequate; his plans for specific measures to accelerate the roll-out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8974/21]

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

Those commitments were further supported through regulations made under the Wireless Telegraphy Act 1926, enabling ComReg to release additional rights of use for radio spectrum on a temporary basis. Ministerial consent was granted for this framework proposed by the regulator to provide flexibility for mobile network operators to create additional capacity for mobile phone and broadband services and accommodate the increased demand due to Covid 19 related working and studying from home. Licences were issued to three mobile network operators and renewed on a number of occasions with the most recent renewal valid until 1 April 2021.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention is being delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the nearly 540,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools.

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

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of 3

March, 287 publicly accessible BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development.

Bringing connectivity to remote rural locations is central to promoting regional development and BCPs represent an important delivery in the early stages of the National Broadband Plan.

### **National Broadband Plan**

66. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the discussions he or his Department have had to date in 2021 with National Broadband Ireland to date in 2021 in relation to speeding up the roll-out of the national broadband plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1012/21]

77. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress being made to accelerate the roll-out of broadband to rural Ireland as committed to in the Programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13085/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 66 and 77 together.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of good reliable broadband to ensure that citizens across Ireland can avail of remote working, education and other essential online facilities. The Programme for Government commits to seek to accelerate the roll out of the National Broadband Plan. In this regard, my Department continues to engage with NBI to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of this rollout to establish the possibility of bringing forward premises which are currently scheduled in years 6 and 7 of the current plan to an earlier date.

NBI has established a dedicated team to investigate acceleration of the rollout from its current contracted schedule of seven years. As part of that work NBI is engaging with current build partners (eir and enet) to bring forward build activities and is also actively reviewing other possible build partners such as the ESB where such options could also speed up the build process. Exploring the potential to accelerate the network rollout is being undertaken in parallel with the measures required to mitigate delays arising as a result of Covid-19.

### **Electricity Generation**

67. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the discussions he has held with stakeholders regarding the future use of the West Offaly power station; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44951/20]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I refer to the reply to Question No. [44952/20] on today's Order Paper.

### **Renewable Energy Generation**

68. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Com-

munications the status of the development of microgeneration; when persons will be able to sell power back to the grid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45098/20]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government commits to prioritising the development of micro-generation, letting people sell excess power back to the grid by July 2021. The measures set out below will assist in delivering this commitment.

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

A Micro-Generation working group, chaired by my Department, is developing an enabling framework for micro-generation which tackles existing barriers and establishes suitable supports within relevant market segments. The proposed support mechanism is outlined in a public consultation which opened on 14th January 2021.

A suitable payment for excess electricity generated on site and exported to the grid will be available to all microgenerators by 2021 in line with Articles 21 and 22 of the recast Renewable Energy Directive. As regards the other Articles of the Directive, I have already given effect to the relevant provisions of Articles 4 and 6, relating to support schemes for energy from renewable sources, through the European Union (Renewable Energy) Regulations 2020. It is intended that all relevant provisions of the Directive will be transposed into Irish law prior to the transposition deadline of 30 June 2021.

*Question No. 69 answered with Question No. 64.*

## **Energy Policy**

70. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress on the completion of a new strategy to tackle energy poverty to replace the strategy which lapsed in 2019. [13079/21]

103. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he plans to consider the impact of energy poverty on mental health in the new strategy to tackle energy poverty. [13080/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 70 and 103 together.

The Government's Strategy to Combat Energy Poverty was published in 2016. The Strategy set out several actions to alleviate the burden of energy poverty on the most vulnerable in society. The focus of the strategy was on high impact actions which aimed to make a real difference to the lives of those in energy poverty.

Good progress has been made under the strategy including:

- Free upgrades were carried out in over 23,000 lower income homes under the main Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) energy poverty retrofit schemes;

- A consultation on energy efficiency in the rented sector has also been completed which has informed changes to energy efficiency grant schemes with further recommendations to follow later this year;

- Funding for SEAI energy poverty retrofit schemes has increased dramatically over the period from €15 million in 2015 to over €109 million for 2021.

- The allocations for retrofit of social housing have also increased significantly with an allocation of €65 million for 2021.

Income supports from the Department of Social Protection to help households with the costs of heating their homes have also increased. The Minister for Social Protection provides an estimated €300 million in 2021 for 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. 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. The Department of Social Protection also funds an exceptional needs payment, which can include support with fuel bills in some cases.

Research undertaken by the Economic and Social research Institute shows that the proportion of households in or at risk of energy poverty has reduced from 28% in 2015 to 17.5% in 2020. The Survey on Income and Living Conditions 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.

A review of the implementation of the Strategy to Combat Energy Poverty will be completed this year and will inform next steps in relation to the development of a new strategy. Alleviating energy poverty will also be a key consideration for the National Retrofit Framework which will be published this year. Retrofitting of homes supports good physical and mental health by creating healthy indoor living environments with healthy air temperatures, humidity levels, noise levels, and improved air quality.

### **Warmer Homes Scheme**

71. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the measures being taken to reduce the current long wait times for surveying and commencement of works under the warmer homes scheme, free energy upgrades for eligible homes; when applications under this scheme will be open for second-time applicants given that certain works are now available that were not available on their initial uptake of the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13253/21]

122. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the action he has taken in order to deal with the waiting time for the warmer homes scheme; the number of households waiting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13086/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**  
I propose to take Questions Nos. 71 and 122 together.

The Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme delivers a range of energy efficiency measures free of charge to low income households vulnerable to energy poverty. To date, over 142,000 homes have received free upgrades under the scheme and in 2020 the average value of the energy efficiency measures provided per household was over €14,800. There are currently over 7,800 homes on the scheme work programme. This includes homes that: are currently undergoing works; have been allocated to contractors for works; completed an initial home survey and are awaiting allocation to a contractor or are awaiting an initial survey. SEAI data indicates that

for homes completed in 2020, the average time from application to completion was approximately 18 months. This has been impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. The average time for a surveyor to be allocated over this period was approximately 8 months.

Work in relation to recommendations on the implementation of changes to the scheme including the issue of repeat upgrade visits has been ongoing in recent months and is nearing completion.

Funding for the SEAI energy poverty retrofit schemes has increased to over €109 million in 2021 - an increase of €47 million on last year. In addition, delivery capacity has increased due to a new, broader contractor panel that commenced at the end of 2020. I also secured additional resources this year to expand the capacity of the SEAI to deliver the scheme. My Department is also in regular contact with the SEAI in relation to the operation of the Scheme.

### **North-South Interconnector**

72. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the latest negotiations on the North-South interconnector between his Department and a company (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13199/21]

74. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if a meeting will be arranged with his Department and council officials (details supplied) to discuss the North-South interconnector project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13198/21]

81. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will meet with representatives of community groups (details supplied) that are seeking a revision of the North-South interconnector to ensure that the project is undergrounded in order to appraise himself of the concerns of those communities that will be affected by the current proposals. [13089/21]

99. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to engage with communities along the route of the proposed north-south interconnector in counties Cavan, Monaghan and Meath; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that there is strong and widespread opposition in these communities to the present proposal to put the transmission cables over-ground in the event of the project proceeding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1516/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**  
I propose to take Questions Nos. 72, 74, 81 and 99 together.

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 by 2030. 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.

Government does not have any role in the delivery of electricity infrastructure on the ground. This is consistent with the 2012 Government Policy Statement on the Strategic Importance of Transmission and Other Energy Infrastructure which states: 'The Government does not seek to direct EirGrid and ESB Networks or other energy infrastructure developers to particular sites or routes or technologies'. Therefore I do not enter into any negotiations with EirGrid on

the project and I have had no direct contact with local authorities or with local groups opposed to the project.

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 repeat of such a review.

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

### **National Broadband Plan**

73. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the roll-out of the national broadband plan. [12894/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Design work is complete or ongoing under the National Broadband Plan in target townlands across every county in Ireland with nearly 187,000 premises surveyed as of 3 March 2021.

This survey work is feeding into detailed designs for each deployment area and the first fibre to the home connections have been made in Carrigaline, Co Cork and in Cavan. Technical testing and validation continues prior to a wider release of the area. Since 25 January 2021 retailers are able to resell the service and householders in these areas can order high speed broadband provided via the NBI network

Further details are available on specific areas 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](http://www.nbi.ie). Individuals who register with this facility will receive regular updates on progress by NBI on delivering the network and specific updates related to their own premises when works are due to commence.

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of 3 March 287 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and will be connected with high speed publicly accessible broadband through a service provider contract managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development and by the Department of Education for schools. NBI have agreed to accelerate the rollout of high speed broadband to some 679 primary schools by the end of 2022.

*Question No. 74 answered with Question No. 72.*

75. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the level of engagement with the review in late 2020 of Ireland's long-term renovation strategy as required under the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive; if the submissions have been examined; the steps he plans to take in 2021 to progress the implementation of the strategy given the way in which improving the energy efficiency of buildings here is central to Ireland's climate action objectives; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1495/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Energy Performance in Buildings Directive requires all Member States of the European Union to develop a Long-Term Renovation Strategy for a highly energy-efficient and decarbonised building stock.

Ireland's Long-Term Renovation Strategy was developed based on the policies, measures and actions set out in the Climate Action Plan (published in 2019) and the National Energy and Climate Plan (published in 2020). It was submitted to the European Commission in October 2020. There is a range of steps set out in the Long-Term Renovation Strategy that are being taken to progress the retrofit of the building stock. I would highlight, in particular, the significant increase in resourcing provided to SEAI and the increased budget for support schemes across the residential, commercial and public sectors.

The Long-Term Renovation Strategy does not include all the policies and measures for the sector that will be necessary to meet the commitments set out in the Programme for Government to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions in the period to 2030 and net zero emissions by 2050. The additional policies and measures will be considered as part of the next Climate Action Plan which is currently under development.

A public consultation on the Long-Term Renovation Strategy was held from October to December 2020. A total of 22 submissions were received which are helping to inform the development of the next Climate Action Plan and future revisions of the Long-Term Renovation Strategy.

### **Energy Efficiency**

76. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his views on the availability of SEAI grants for private home owners to retrofit and insulate their homes; if these schemes will be expanded to cater for more persons; the current waiting time for a person that may wish to avail of same; if funding will be increased for these schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13087/21]

**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 SEA 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 th. SEAI are available at [www.seai.ie](http://www.seai.ie)

*Question No. 77 answered with Question No. 66.*

### **Data Centres**

78. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the impact that data centres will have on electricity demand in Ireland over the next decade; the policy interventions planned as a result; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44949/20]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Government policy in relation to data centres is primarily a matter for the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The Government Statement on the role of data centres in Ireland's Enterprise Strategy, 2018 recognises that a plan-led approach is needed to develop a range of measures to promote regional options for data centre investment, minimising the need for additional electricity grid infrastructure.

Data centre related electricity demand in Ireland continues to grow. EirGrid, in their Generation Capacity Statement 2020-2029, project that demand from data centres could account for 27% of all demand by 2029, up from 2% in 2018. Significant increases in volumes of generation capacity, including from renewable energy sources, will be required to meet Ireland's electrification objectives including demand from heat pumps, electric vehicles and data centres.

The Climate Action Plan sets out a number of actions to ensure that data centres are accommodated in a sustainable manner including implementing flexible demand and other innovative solutions for data centres. This has been implemented by EirGrid for new data centres seeking to connect in Dublin.

EirGrid has launched this week a public consultation on 'Shaping our Electricity Future'. The aim is to make the electricity grid stronger and more flexible so that it can carry significantly more renewable generation as well as meet increasing demand from high volume energy users such as data centres. EirGrid's consultation will align with Ireland's strategy to further reduce electricity emissions which will be set out in this years revision to the Climate Action Plan.

Work is also ongoing by the Renewable Electricity Corporate Power Purchase Agreements (CPPAs) Steering Group, led by the the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) in order to deliver on the step up in ambition in the Climate Action Plan of meeting 15% of electricity demand from CPPAs by 2030. A public consultation on options is currently underway and

is running until the 31st March 2021; the relevant documentation is available at [www.seai.ie](http://www.seai.ie)

### **Renewable Energy Generation**

79. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps he is taking to procure new renewable energy sources particularly vital for heating and transport sectors given their current heavy reliance on oil and gas; if he is satisfied with the current rate of the transition away from fossil fuels; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1577/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government commits Ireland to achieving an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030 and to achieving net zero emissions by 2050.

This will require a significant shift away from fossil fuels and a corresponding increase in the use of renewable energy across all sectors. Currently 12% of the energy we consume is from renewable sources. The National Energy & Climate Plan, which was approved by the Government and published last year, commits us to reaching a level of 34% by 2030.

In order to achieve this target, the Government has set a target of 70% of the electricity we consume to come from renewable sources by 2030. We are currently over halfway to achieving this target and the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme will support further increases as evidenced by the successful first auction which took place last year.

In the heat sector, the National Energy & Climate Plan envisages an increase from the current level of 6% renewable energy to 24% by 2030. This will be achieved by a combination of retrofitting 500,000 homes, installing 400,000 heat pumps, ensuring new buildings do not install fossil fuel heating systems and supporting the growth of renewable energy through programmes such as the Support Scheme for Renewable Heat.

Growth in renewable energy in the transport sector will also be required which is within my remit as Minister for Transport. This will include significant growth in the use of electric vehicles powered by electricity that will be 70% renewable by 2030. It will also include growth in the use of sustainable biofuels displacing fossil fuels in conventionally power vehicles.

I would note the policies and measures currently in place are not sufficient to meet the commitments set out in the Programme for Government. An updated Climate Action Plan is currently under development and I expect this will further increase the rate at which we move away from fossil fuels to renewable technologies.

### **Environmental Policy**

80. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will report on the outcomes of the Shared Island Dialogue on The Environment and Climate - Addressing Shared Challenges of February 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12763/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Shared Island Dialogue series was launched by the Taoiseach last October as part of the Government's Shared Island Initiative and is central to our Shared Island approach, working

with the Northern Ireland Executive and the British Government to address shared strategic challenges, in ambitious and effective partnership, founded on the Good Friday Agreement.

Alongside PEACE PLUS, the Government in Budget 2021 announced our Shared Island Fund, with €500m in capital funding being made available over the next five years, ring-fenced for collaborative North/South investments, to be made in line with our Programme for Government commitments and priorities, including on environmental protection and sustainable development

I delivered the opening address at the second dialogue which took place on 5 February, on the theme “Environment and Climate - addressing shared challenges on the island.” The purpose of the dialogue was to inform the development of the Shared Island Initiative in view of the priority placed by the Government on addressing the climate and biodiversity crises, and protecting our shared environment on the island.

The event was moderated by Kevin O’Sullivan, Environment and Science Editor with the Irish Times, and there were three panel discussions on the themes of “Tackling the climate emergency - a shared island perspective”; “Addressing the biodiversity crisis on the island”; and Future priorities for all-island cooperation on environment”.

This second dialogue brought together more than 100 participants from across the island of Ireland joined in an online discussion involving civil society groups, business and agriculture representatives, academic and research experts, local authorities and state agencies. In doing so, the dialogue provided an opportunity for experts to share experience and suggestions on what works, what more could be done together and where we could learn from each other on the island - in government, in research, and in our economy and society - to protect our shared environment.

The Shared Island Dialogues are organised by the Shared Island Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach in partnership with Government Departments. The Dialogue series will contribute to the Government’s approach to the Shared Island Initiative, complementing commissioned research and the implementation of commitments on building a Shared Island that are set out in the Programme for Government. Further information on the Shared Island Initiative is available at [www.gov.ie/sharedisland](http://www.gov.ie/sharedisland), with reports from plenary sessions of the Shared Island Dialogues being added at [www.gov.ie/sharedisland/dialogues](http://www.gov.ie/sharedisland/dialogues).

*Question No. 81 answered with Question No. 72.*

### **North-South Interconnector**

**82. Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he has examined the potential devaluation of private homes close to overhead pylons proposed for the north-south interconnector grid in counties Meath, Cavan and Monaghan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1572/21]

**86. Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if a review of the proposed north-south interconnector project will be undertaken in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1517/21]

**88. Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the details of the most recent occasions he has met with all anti-pylon groups, community groups and residents and farmers over concerns for overhead pylons on the north-south interconnector route in counties Meath, Cavan and Monaghan; and if he will make a statement

on the matter. [1571/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**  
I propose to take Questions Nos. 82, 86, 86 and 88 together.

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 by 2030. 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.

Government does not have any role in the delivery of electricity infrastructure on the ground. This is consistent with the 2012 Government Policy Statement on the Strategic Importance of Transmission and Other Energy Infrastructure which 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 repeat of such a review.

In a separate independent study carried out by KHSK Economic Consultants and also published in October 2018, the issue of possible impacts on the valuation of homes was considered. The report "International Practice in the approach to and levels of compensation of property owners in proximity to high voltage transmission lines" indicated that transmission lines have a negligible or small impact on property values, and where an impact was found it tends to be short term only. It is to be expected that this project will attract new levels of investment and employment opportunities that will significantly benefit the local economy.

EirGrid and ESB Networks, as our electricity system operators, always seek to work in close collaboration with landowners and stakeholders in the delivery of electricity infrastructure. Both companies are engaging with those living closest to the route of the interconnector. In that regard 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 to Covid-19 public health guidelines.

### **Greenhouse Gas Emissions**

83. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress to date in achieving emission reduction targets in line with the programme for Government whilst at the same time protecting economic progress in the agri-food business or other sectors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [8973/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**  
The programme for Government commits to an annual average 7% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions to 2030.

While Irish agriculture has a positive international reputation in terms of producing high quality, sustainable produce, emissions from the agri-food sector have continued to increase. The long-term challenge for the sector is to achieve carbon neutrality, while not compromising our capacity for sustainable food production. The Government is committed to finding the balance between environmental, climate and biodiversity needs, and supports for farmers.

The Climate Action Plan 2019 includes measures for the Department for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to deliver in order to ensure we meet our existing EU targets. The next Climate Action Plan 2021 will further evolve the climate policy in the area, including in respect of the agri-food industry. We are working to identify actions to support increased carbon removals. Land-use offers significant potential to sequester additional carbon and may provide a new source of family farm income and rural economic benefit. As well as developing the next Climate Action Plan, we are evaluating the potential climate contributions from land use improvements, to set in train the development of a land land-use strategy

Finally, we recognise the interlinked role the agriculture and agri-food sectors have with the waste sector and are committed to supporting the agri-food sector to evolve Ireland's capability as a leader in circular economies. We are investing in research in the agri-food sector to prioritise investment in climate and the bio-economy and will implement the National Policy Statement on the Bio-economy, providing the agri-food sector with new opportunities using biological resources in a sustainable and circular manner

With the correct policy choices in the agriculture sector, we can reward farmers for sequestering carbon, restoring biodiversity, improving water and air quality, producing clean energy, and developing schemes that support results-based outcomes.

### **National Broadband Plan**

84. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if National Broadband Ireland will provide greater functionality and more detail on its website with a rolling update of network build plans across rural Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13082/21]

**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.

I am aware that concerns have been raised regarding the level of information available on the deployment of the NBI network and I am advised that NBI are working to provide greater functionality and more detail on their website with a rolling update of network build plans. NBI also has a dedicated email address, [reps@nbi.ie](mailto:reps@nbi.ie), which can be used by Oireachtas members for specific queries.

### **Environmental Policy**

85. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the development of the Celtic interconnector; and if he will make a

statement on the matter. [1331/21]

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

The Celtic Interconnector is a €1 billion electricity interconnector jointly proposed by EirGrid and their French counterparts, the French transmission system operator, RTE (Reseau de Transport d'Électricite). It is proposed as a 575km long (500km subsea), 700MW cable from the north-west coast of France to the south coast of Ireland. At this scale it would be able to provide electricity for some 450,000 homes.

The Celtic Interconnector will provide a reliable high-capacity electricity link between Ireland and France that will have significant benefits for the people of Ireland. The project will provide access to the European internal energy market, leading to expected increased competition and lower prices in Ireland. It will also enhance security of electricity supply and facilitate increased capacity for renewable energy here via export access to the mainland European markets.

In late 2019 the European Commission announced a grant of €530 million towards the construction of the interconnector under the Connecting Europe Facility fund. This grant was made possible by significant support for the project from the Irish Government that resulted in its designation as an EU Project of Common Interest.

Extensive planning by EirGrid and a period of public consultation took place last year with regard to the development of interconnector infrastructure, following which decisions were reached on the interconnector's location in East Cork. A further decision was arrived at by EirGrid regarding the establishment of an enhanced community benefit scheme for impacted communities.

While I have no function in this matter, my officials have been informed that EirGrid will likely submit its planning application for Celtic Interconnector project in Spring this year with the project estimated to be completed in 2026.

*Question No. 86 answered with Question No. 82.*

## **Data Protection**

87. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will report on the recent news that EU member states have now agreed on a negotiating mandate for revised rules on the protection of privacy and confidentiality in the use of electronic communications services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13292/21]

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

On the 10th February, agreement was reached by Member States on a mandate to enter negotiations with the European Parliament on the Regulation concerning the respect for private life and the protection of personal data in electronic communications and repealing Directive 2002/58/EC (Regulation on Privacy and Electronic Communications), colloquially known as the ePrivacy Regulation. Prior to this agreement being reached, discussions had been on-going in Council for over four years, a testament to the file's complexity.

The ePrivacy Regulation will repeal and replace the existing ePrivacy Directive and aims to makes Europe's online privacy rules fit for the digital age. It will update the rules in respect of the processing of end-users' electronic communications data (including metadata); the storage of information on end-user's terminal equipment; direct marketing using electronic communications services; and, inclusion in publically available directories. The ePrivacy Regulation

particularises and complements the General Data Protection Regulation (“GDPR”).

I look forward to the beginning of the trilogue negotiations on this important file, which my officials will be closely monitoring. Ensuring the privacy of our citizens’ online communications is vital to maintaining their trust in an increasingly digitalised world and at the same time, it is important that any agreement reached on this file is sustainable going forward.

*Question No. 88 answered with Question No. 82.*

### **Cybersecurity Policy**

89. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the engagement he has had and the plans he has considered in relation to the commitment to build the capacity of the National Cyber Security Centre; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13247/21]

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

*Question No. 90 answered with Question No. 60.*

### **Environmental Policy**

91. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the engagement he has had to date with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage with regard to supporting and promoting efforts at the local government level on climate action, particularly in relation to County Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1598/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Under the Climate Action Plan 2019, a Climate Action Charter for Local Authorities was agreed between my Department and the Local Authorities. The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government were consulted as part of this process.

The goal of the Charter is to ensure that every Local Authority embeds decarbonisation, sustainable development and climate resilience into every aspect of the work they do. The Charter acknowledges the need to take collective action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and address the impacts of climate change, while also committing Local Authorities to being advocates for climate action.

Under the Charter, Local Authorities will measure the carbon impact of activities and implement measures to reduce carbon emissions in line with national objectives, including a 50% improvement in energy efficiency by 2030. In 2018 my Department entered into a five year financial commitment of €10 million to establish four Climate Action Regional Offices

(CAROs). Mayo County Council is the lead authority for the Atlantic Seaboard North region, which includes both Local Authorities in County Galway, along with those in counties Donegal, Sligo, and Mayo.

My Department engages with all four CAROs on a regular basis, in particular through participation in the National Local Authority Climate Action Steering Group. Under the National Adaptation Framework each Local Authority has developed a Local Adaptation Strategy. These strategies are now being implemented, and each CARO is working with the Local Authorities in its region to both facilitate and monitor implementation of the local climate adaptation actions within the strategies.

The Climate Action Bill further strengthens the role of Local Authorities in climate action. It sets out legislative requirements for each Local Authority to produce its own Climate Action Plan (covering both mitigation and adaptation) within eighteen months of the enactment of the Bill, and then subsequently at least once every five years. These plans will have to be consistent with national climate plans and strategies, and Local Authorities will have to liaise with each other in the preparation of these plans

To build the necessary capacity, my Department is also funding and engaging with the CAROs in relation to the implementation of a new Local Authority climate action training programme. This programme will increase knowledge of climate change and the need for action among all Local Authority staff, and will facilitate both climate mitigation and adaptation at local level

A further €65 million has been provided for retrofitting the social housing stock this year through the Vote of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. It is estimated that this funding will result in 2,400 retrofits to B2 or cost optimal equivalent though the final number is dependent on the initial condition and dwelling type

## **Electricity Generation**

92. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will report on his Department's recent public consultation on microgeneration; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13278/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government commits to prioritising the development of micro-generation to help citizens generate their own renewable electricity for their own use, for example from solar panels on their roofs, and allow people sell excess electricity back to the grid by July 2021. A Micro-Generation working group, chaired by my Department, is developing an enabling framework for micro-generation which tackles existing barriers and establishes suitable supports within relevant market segments. The proposed support mechanism was outlined in a public consultation which closed for submissions on 18 February last. Over 900 submissions were received from the general public and a broad spectrum of industry and interested parties. The assessment and analysis of the submissions is underway, with a view to publication of the final high level design of the Scheme, subject to Government approval in the coming months. Further updates can be found at gov.ie - Renewable Electricity ([www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie)).

A suitable payment for excess electricity generated on site and exported to the grid will be available to all microgenerators by 2021 in line with Articles 21 and 22 of the recast Renewable Energy Directive. It is intended that all relevant provisions of the Directive will be transposed into Irish law prior to the transposition deadline of 30 June 2021.

The Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) published an updated Roadmap for the Clean Energy Package's Electricity and Renewables Directives in February, which provides for a public consultation on the regulatory framework for prosumer development later this year. The document is available on the CRU website [CRU21019-2021-Roadmap-for-the-Clean-Energy-Packages-Electricity-and-Renewables-Directives.pdf](https://www.cru.ie/~/media/2021/02/22/clean-energy-package-electricity-and-renewables-directives.pdf).

### **National Broadband Plan**

93. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the roll-out of the national broadband plan nationally and specifically in rural areas of north County Dublin as of January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1418/21]

**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.

Design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across every county in Ireland with over 186,000 premises surveyed as of 3 March.

This activity involves physically walking the routes and documenting images, notes and measurements of the poles, cables and underground ducts in each area.

There are 13,429 premises within the intervention area of County Dublin for the National Broadband Plan. As of 3 March some 2,437 (18%) of the premises in County Dublin have been surveyed. Surveying has taken place in Skerries, Balbriggan and North County Dublin and surveys are due to commence in the areas of Lusk in Q3 of this year. Further details are available on specific areas within Dublin 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](http://www.nbi.ie). Individuals who register with this facility will receive regular updates on progress by NBI on delivering the network and specific updates related to their own premises when works are due to commence.

I am aware that concerns have been raised regarding the level of information available on the deployment of the NBI network and I am advised that NBI is working to provide more detail on its website, with a rolling update on network build plans.

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of 3 March, 287 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible locations and the Department of Education for schools. Glenasmole Community Centre, Man of War GAA, Fingal Ravens GAA, and Stars of Erin GAA / Dublin Mountain Community Centre Centre have now been connected with high speed publicly accessible broadband, with more locations planned over the coming months. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

Balscadden National School has also been connected for educational access only as part of this initiative. My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise other 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 has been announced 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. 94 answered with Question No. 64.*

### **Energy Efficiency**

95. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of retrofitting homes in the country; the number of those who have availed of the retrofitting programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45096/20]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) administers a range of energy efficiency grant schemes to support homeowners to retrofit their properties. Since 2000, over 440,000 homeowners have received direct support under these schemes. Over 142,000 of these were free upgrades for lower income households. This has resulted in warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes that are easier and cheaper to heat and light.

Preliminary data shows that last year alone, SEAI residential and community retrofit schemes supported the upgrading of over 17,600 homes. This includes over 3,200 homes upgraded to BER rating of B2 or better. The number of retrofits last year were unfortunately, negatively impacted by COVID-19 related restrictions.

A total of €221.5 million in capital funding has been provided for SEAI residential and community retrofit programmes this year. This represents an 82% increase on the 2020 allocation and is the largest amount ever for the schemes. This allocation will kick-start the first phase of our retrofit plan. The funding has supported calls for projects under the new National Retrofit (One-Stop-Shop Development) scheme and the Community Energy Grant Scheme as well as a €47 million increase in funding for energy poverty schemes. Further SEAI administered retrofit initiatives will be launched in the coming months. In addition to the SEAI allocation, €65 million has been provided to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to support the retrofitting of local authority homes.

### **Renewable Energy Generation**

96. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the way in which the community benefit element of the renewable electricity support scheme will operate; if funding will be available for community projects in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1423/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS) is the main government support to help deliver on Ireland's 70% renewable electricity target by 2030. A mandatory Community Benefit Fund must be provided by all projects successful in a RESS auction. These funds will be aligned to incentivise investment in local renewable energy, energy efficiency measures and climate action initiatives. The community benefit fund under the first RESS auction which was held last year will deliver almost €4 million a year to sustainable community initiatives targeted at those communities living in close proximity to the RESS-1 Projects.

My Department has already committed to the publication of a National Register and a

Good Practice Principles Handbook by July 2021. This will lay out a range of principles, including guidance on how the new funds will be managed and administered and the need to ensure community participation in fund decision-making via the establishment of a local committee. My Department and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) are now developing a draft of this handbook which will be made available for public consultation shortly with public webinars planned.

The first RESS auction also included a dedicated community projects category in which seven projects were selected for support. My aim is to ensure the delivery of some 100 community electricity generation projects by 2030. In future onshore RESS auctions, there will be additional capacity allocated to the community category and I have decided that only fully community-owned projects will be eligible.

In order to ensure an adequate pipeline I have allocated an additional €3 million in capital funding this year for the SEAI to stimulate locally-owned community energy projects. This funding will enable SEAI to deploy a range of capacity-building supports including information dissemination, trusted intermediary and advisor services, and financial supports; and I will announce further details of this enabling framework shortly.

## Energy Policy

97. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will clarify his position in relation to LNG terminals; if he supports such gas infrastructure being included on the EU Projects of Common Interests lists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13285/21]

121. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will clarify Government policy in relation to the building of LNG terminals here; if such proposals are compatible with the State commitment to the Paris climate treaty; if he will consider a proposal to remove LNGs from the list in the Planning and Development Act 2000 of strategic infrastructure developments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13280/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 97 and 121 together.

The Programme for Government sets out that as Ireland moves towards carbon neutrality, it does not make sense to develop LNG projects importing fracked gas. It further commits to ensuring the Shannon LNG project is not included in the EU Projects of Common Interest list in 2021. I have previously confirmed that if an LNG project were to apply for inclusion on the 2021 list of EU Projects of Common Interest, Ireland would not provide the required Member State approval and accordingly such a project would not be included on the list. I would note that no LNG projects in Ireland have applied for inclusion on the 2021 list. Furthermore, the European Commission has proposed an update to the relevant regulation, which Ireland has supported, that will ensure no LNG projects would be eligible to be Projects of Common Interest in future.

The Programme for Government also sets out that the Government does not support the importation of fracked gas and commits to developing a policy statement to establish that ap-

proach. My Department is in the process of developing the policy statement, which includes the consideration of any necessary legal and regulatory provisions. This includes detailed examination of the European energy and environmental frameworks, in which our national laws operate, to ensure the policy statement will be legally robust. Once finalised, I intend to bring the policy statement to Government for approval.

In addition, my Department is carrying out a review of the security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and natural gas systems which is focusing on the period to 2030 in the context of ensuring a sustainable pathway to 2050. The review will include a detailed technical analysis and a public consultation. The review will inform future policy in relation to natural gas supplies, gas storage, electricity interconnection, emergency reserves and other measures that would enhance our security of supply. This will be done in the context of the doubling of the electricity generated from renewable sources to 70% of Ireland's final consumption and the achievement of net zero emissions by 2050. It is in the context of this study that any changes to planning legislation could be considered. I expect that the review will be completed by the end of 2021.

### **Environmental Policy**

98. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he has concerns regarding potential negative impacts on the Kerry International Dark Sky Reserve, the only gold reserve in the northern hemisphere from the siting by a company (details supplied) of its pilot communications antennae project. [13091/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** There is currently no legislation in Ireland dealing specifically with environmental light pollution, and my Department has no role in this regard. I am advised that the amount of light that might emanate from a proposed development is considered in assessing individual planning applications on a case by case basis. However, there is no specific national strategy in place in relation to 'light pollution' under environmental legislation. The designation by the International Dark-Sky Association of 700 square kilometres on the Iveragh Peninsula, County Kerry, as the first International Dark Sky Reserve in Ireland has been a significant addition to the county's rich tourism profile.

I understand that officials at the Department of Rural and Community Development 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.

The company was provided with the contact details for the Local Authority Broadband Officers by the Department of Rural and Community Affairs. They also addressed the monthly Broadband Officers network meeting on 25 February 2021.

The decision to proceed with the pilot is a matter for the relevant Local Authority and my Department has had no role in the matter.

*Question No. 99 answered with Question No. 72.*

### **Environmental Policy**

100. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Com-

munications the activity of the National Bioeconomy Forum to date since its launch; if a work programme has been developed for 2021; when such a programme will be launched; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1422/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The National Policy Statement on the Bioeconomy, published in March 2018, outlined Ireland's ambition to be a global leader in the bioeconomy. To facilitate the necessary cross-Government policy implementation, the Government established a high level Bioeconomy Implementation Group, jointly chaired by my Department, and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. The National Policy Statement mandated the Implementation Group to establish a Bioeconomy Forum to liaise with the relevant industry and State bodies, and community groups, across bioeconomy relevant sectors. The Implementation Group has agreed on the role of the Bioeconomy Forum, which will aim to facilitate the development of bioeconomy sectors to provide the full range of economic, environmental and societal benefits, advocate sustainable practice, and provide a link between the Implementation Group and relevant stakeholders. The Implementation Group will serve the Forum in an advisory and consultative capacity.

The BioEconomy Forum was launched during National Bioeconomy Week in October 2020. My Department is now working closely with colleagues in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to confirm a Chair for the Forum, invite and structure Forum membership, and allocate appropriate staff and resources to support the Chair in the design and delivery of a work programme. The Forum will help underpin effective and informed cross-Government strategic policy to develop Ireland's bioeconomy.

### **National Broadband Plan**

101. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps being taken to support remote working through the roll-out of high-speed fibre broadband connections in internet blackspot-prone rural areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44160/20]

174. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the initiatives he plans to take to expedite the availability of reliable, effective, high-speed broadband nationally with particular reference to the need to facilitate those forced to work or study at home arising from the Covid-19 crisis; if he remains satisfied that everything is being done that can be done to facilitate the workforce in these circumstances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1499/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 101 and 174 together.

The Covid 19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of good reliable broadband to ensure that citizens across Ireland can avail of remote working, education and other essential online facilities. This is reflected in the commitments in the Programme for Government where delivery of the National Broadband Plan will be a key enabler to many of the policies envisaged particularly around increased levels of remote working.

Design work on the National Broadband Plan is complete or ongoing in target townlands across every county in Ireland with over 186,000 premises surveyed as of the 3 March. This survey work is feeding into detailed designs for each deployment area and the first fibre to the home connections are connected and in a test and trial phase in Carrigaline, Co Cork. They will be subject to technical testing and validation prior to a wider release of the area. Over the

coming months retailers will be able to resell the service and householders in these areas will be able to order high speed broadband provided via the NBI network. A test and trial phase in Cavan and Galway will also commence shortly.

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 3 March, 287 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible locations and the Department of Education for schools.

The Programme for Government has committed to seek to accelerate the roll out of the National Broadband Plan. In this regard, my Department continues to engage with NBI to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of this rollout to establish the possibility of bringing forward premises which are currently scheduled in years 6 and 7 of the current plan to an earlier date.

NBI has established a dedicated team to investigate acceleration of the rollout from its current contracted schedule of seven years. Exploring the potential to accelerate the network rollout is being undertaken in parallel with the measures required to mitigate delays arising as a result of Covid-19.

### **Energy Efficiency**

102. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he has had engagement with Government colleagues and other Departments regarding the way to alleviate the financial burden that retrofitting poses for householders in a way that will encourage and facilitate greater levels of retrofitting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1578/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set ambitious targets to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2/cost optimal and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings over the next 10 years. In order to achieve these targets, we will need to address a range of issues including long payback periods and homeowners' ability to pay the upfront costs associated with retrofit. That is why financing will be a key pillar of our national retrofit plan.

Government has signalled its commitment to achieving these targets and to supporting the cost of retrofit through allocations of €3.7 billion in the National Development Plan and €5 billion in the Programme for Government.

These allocations have helped to deliver increased budgets for SEAI grant schemes, which play a crucial role in assisting homeowners to fund retrofits. This year's budget for SEAI residential and community retrofit programmes is €221.5 million. This represents an 82% increase on the 2020 allocation and is the largest amount ever for the schemes.

It is clear however, that it will not be possible to meet the full cost of retrofit programme over the decade to come through Exchequer funding alone. Additional action is required to mobilise private capital and develop financial models that are suitable for each householder group. In this regard, my Department are engaging with the Department of Finance and the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland in relation to alternative measures that could further reduce the financing cost of retrofit for homeowners. I have also worked closely with the

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform on financing matters and will continue to do so as part of the NDP review. My Department has also engaged with a range of other Government Departments and agencies, both bilaterally and as part of the Retrofit Taskforce.

*Question No. 103 answered with Question No. 70.*

### **Climate Change Policy**

104. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he has identified the main categories for new ambition beyond the existing Climate Action Plan in order to achieve the enhanced target of 51% greenhouse gas reduction by 2030. [12893/21]

**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 currently working with colleagues across Government on a new Climate Action Plan which will include additional policies and measures in every sector to bring about the significant changes needed to transform our society. Preparation of the plan will involve extensive and ongoing collaboration with Government Departments and Bodies and consultation with the public. I will launch a public consultation on the new plan in the coming weeks.

There are several categories under which our climate ambition will need to be delivered:

- identifying actions/measures undelivered from the Climate Action Plan 2019;
- proposing actions that naturally fall out of the work of Climate Action Plan 2019;
- examining actions and commitments contained in the Programme for Government; and
- outlining possible additional sectoral actions/measures.

As with the Climate Action Plan 2019, the new plan will have a strong focus on implementation, including actions with specific timelines and steps needed to achieve each action and assigning clear lines of responsibility for delivery. Implementation of the Climate Action Plan will be monitored closely and the plan will be updated annually to adjust and refocus existing actions and set out new policy actions to ensure we remain on track and within our emission limits.

### **National Broadband Plan**

105. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the engagement he has had with National Broadband Ireland to escalate the roll-out of fibre broadband for areas in County Cork still awaiting survey stage given that surveys are ongoing in certain areas in the county by National Broadband Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13254/21]

124. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of broadband roll-out in Rathpeacon, Old Mallow Road, Cork. [13258/21]

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

I propose to take Questions Nos. 105 a and 124 together.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the over 544,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools. The deployment plan forecasts construction commenced in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years.

There are some 273,548 premises in Co Cork of which approximately 71% have access to high speed broadband through commercial operators. The remaining 79,424 premises, including premises in the area of Rathpeacon, are located in the Intervention Area in County Cork.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) that, as of 3 March 2021, over 186,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Surveys have been completed or are underway in Co Cork in Midelton, Cullen, Templebreedy, Carrigaline, Ballyfoyle, Douglas, Ballyphehane, Glasheen, Mahon, Kilpatrick, Ballydesmond, Kiskeam, Umeraboy, Knocknagree, Rineen, Cullen, Coolinarna, Millstreet, Hollymount and Caherbarnagh. Pre-build works are underway in Fountainstown, Ballinhassig, Monkstown, and Upper Rochestown. The first fibre to the home connections are successfully connected in Carrigaline and construction work is continuing with technical testing and validation taking place prior to wider release of the area.

Further details are available on specific areas within County Cork through the NBI website which provides a facility for any premises within the intervention area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website [www.nbi.ie](http://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](mailto:reps@nbi.ie), which can be used by Oireachtas members for specific queries.

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP and will provide high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of 3 March, 287 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 by the Department of Education for school BCPs. In County Cork BCP sites are installed and connected with high speed broadband at Ballindangan Community Centre, Aghabullogue Community Centre, Castletownkenneigh Community Centre, Lissavard Community Centre, T.O. Park Labbamollaga and Whitechurch Community Centre (which is located 5.45 Kilometres from Rathpeacon, County Cork). Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

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

## Renewable Energy Generation

106. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of his plans to enhance the community energy sector. [12895/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government notes the importance of community energy in delivering on our 70% renewable electricity target by 2030. The first auction in the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS) included a dedicated community projects category in which seven community projects were selected for support. In future onshore RESS auctions, there will be further capacity allocated to the community category and I have decided that only fully community-owned projects will be eligible.

In order to ensure an adequate pipeline I have allocated an additional €3 million in capital funding this year for the SEAI to stimulate locally-owned community energy projects. This funding will enable SEAI to deploy a range of capacity-building supports including information dissemination, trusted intermediary and advisor services and financial supports such as enabling grants. I will announce further details of this enabling framework shortly.

All projects successful in a RESS auction must establish a Community Benefit Fund. For the first auction alone this amounts to close to €4 million in funding annually. These funds will be aligned to incentivise investment in local renewable energy, energy efficiency measures and climate action initiatives.

Under the proposed new microgeneration support scheme to help citizens generate their own renewable electricity, for example from solar panels on their roofs, and receive a fair price when they sell the excess into the grid, renewable energy communities will be eligible for the Clean Export Premium, in addition to the Clean Export Guarantee, for a period of 15 years.

In addition, the Communities Energy Grant Scheme funded by my Department and operated by the SEAI, now with a budget of €30 million, is designed to encourage and support home retrofit to a BER B2 standard, as well as energy efficiency upgrades in commercial, public, community and voluntary sector facilities.

## Environmental Policy

107. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to introduce a tax on single use plastics. [13196/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The introduction of new taxes is a matter for the Minister for Finance. However the Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy, launched last September, sets out our national strategy for single use plastics and contains a range of ambitious measures for dealing with these items. The Plan details the measures Ireland is taking under the Single Use Plastics Directive to prohibit certain items from being placed on the market. Under the provisions of this Directive single use plastic cutlery, plates, straws, balloons and cotton bud sticks may not be placed on the Irish market from 3rd July this year. This also applies to expanded polystyrene cups and food containers and all products containing oxo-degradable plastic.

The Plan also contains our commitment to introduce a Deposit and Return Scheme for plastic bottles and aluminium cans and to lead EU efforts on dealing with disposable coffee cups through a prohibition on the use of these cups for sit-in purposes, a latte levy and an eventual

ban on disposable coffee cups and cold drinks cups.

### Renewable Energy Generation

108. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will address the recent developments in the ability of the electrical grid to accommodate renewable energy from large scale and domestic sources; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13276/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The overall objective of the Programme for Government climate and energy commitments is to underpin Ireland's long-term, sustainable competitiveness as we transition from a fossil-fuel based economic model to a carbon-neutral one. Decarbonisation of our electricity system and upgrading our grid infrastructure will be critical to achieving this ambition. It will mean making far-reaching changes to our electricity system that will affect everyone. EirGrid have this week launched a detailed consultation entitled *Shaping Ireland's Electricity Future* which outlines innovative approaches to developing the grid in order to meet our ambitious 2030 renewable energy targets. Details on the public consultation and how to have your say are available at: [consult.eirgrid.ie](http://consult.eirgrid.ie)

Domestic sources of renewable energy will also necessitate significant grid infrastructure upgrades over the coming decade as microgeneration becomes more commonplace.

The recent Price Review decision from the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) on the allowable spend on our electricity grid over the next five years signalled a dramatic increase in funds for grid enhancement. For example, ESB Networks' allowable capital expenditure has been increased by 84% over the previous period.

The major ramp up in the levels of renewables on our power grid to achieve the Government's 70% renewable electricity target by 2030 and the move to a highly electrified economy will give rise to challenges in ensuring security of supply and maintaining a reliable system for all customers during the transition. The winter capacity margin of available electricity supply over demand has reduced every year over the past five years mainly due to increasing demand, including from data centres, and peat generation exiting the market. The CRU and EirGrid, which both have statutory responsibilities to ensure security of electricity supply, are actively monitoring matters.

My Department is carrying out a review of the security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and natural gas systems. The review will include a detailed technical analysis and a public consultation. It is planned that the review will be completed by the end of 2021.

### National Broadband Plan

109. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the impact that the National Broadband Plan will have on Ireland's carbon emissions' profile; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [44948/20]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** A sustained reduction of commuters and commuting time will, over time, bring a reduction in transport carbon emissions. Previous work in this area indicated that, for each new full-time remote worker, estimated average daily transport-related emissions savings of approximately

2.6-2.9 kg CO<sub>2</sub>, depending on petrol/diesel fuel mix, could be achieved. My Department is currently in the process of updating this analysis to inform the development of new actions to support Ireland's emissions reductions to 2030 under Ireland's Climate Action Plan.

The National Broadband Plan State led intervention has been designed to ensure that as much as possible of the network infrastructure will comprise the re-use of existing poles and ducts, which NBI will lease from existing infrastructure owners. Infrastructure re-use in this manner ensures the State complies with State Aid guidelines and environmental sustainability best practice.

Deployment of the NBP has the potential to deliver a range of environmental benefits linked to Government policy and cloud services as well as reduced emissions from teleworking and business travel. The Cost Benefit Analysis behind the business case for the Government decision to proceed with the NBP highlighted environmental benefits among a variety of other economic and social benefits. However it did not set out to specifically forecast the impact of the NBP on emissions. My Department will be looking at this in more detail in due course, when assessing the benefits that are being delivered on foot of the ramping up of investment in the NBP.

### **National Broadband Plan**

110. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the roll-out of the National Broadband Plan in County Galway; the number of premises in County Galway that are now connected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1597/21]

**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.

Design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across every county in Ireland with over 186,000 premises surveyed as of 3 March.

There are 38,714 premises within the intervention area for County Galway for the National Broadband Plan. As of 3 March some 14,914 (39%) have been surveyed in the areas of Oranmore, Clarinbrige, Claregalway, Furbo and Barna. In the east of the county works are underway in areas around Ballinasloe such as Kiltomer, Oatfield, Annagh, Kilconnell, and Ahascragh. Further details are available on specific areas across the country including County Galway 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](http://www.nbi.ie). Individuals who register with this facility will receive regular updates on progress by NBI on delivering the network and specific updates related to their own premises when works are due to commence.

NBI currently has construction underway on the first 40,000 premises, covering townlands in Carrigaline, Ballinasloe, Cavan, Clare, Dundalk, Galway, Limerick Monaghan, Roscommon, Tipperary, Tralee and Ballinasloe. The first connections to the NBI network have already been made as part of a test and trial phase in Carrigaline and Cavan with a test and trial phase also commencing shortly in Galway. Over the coming months retailers will be able to resell the service and householders will be able to order high speed broadband via the NBP network. NBI is

targeting construction of the fibre network to commence in all 26 counties by the end of 2021.

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 3 March, 287 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible locations and the Department of Education for schools. Lettermullen Community Centre, Comhar Na nOileán, Cortoon Community Centre and Leitrim Community Centre have now been connected with high speed publicly accessible broadband, with more locations planned over the coming months. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

Saint Joesph's National School and Brownsgrove National School have also been connected for educational access as part of this initiative. My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise other 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 has been announced which will see almost 700 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/>.

### **Illegal Dumping**

111. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to reduce illegal dumping nationwide; if he is satisfied that current measures to prevent dumping are sufficient; the role of CCTV in any prevention measures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13088/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department continues to work closely with the EPA and the Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authorities through the National Waste Enforcement Steering Committee to ensure that the legislation in place is robust and effective in assisting their enforcement efforts. The Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy published in September 2020 contains a range of actions designed to enhance existing waste enforcement activity. 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;

These will build on existing actions to combat illegal dumping such as the Anti-Dumping Initiative, which was launched by my Department in 2017, and has provided funding of €9.3 million to local authorities in support of over 1,000 projects. Last year €3m was allocated to local authorities in support of the Anti-Dumping Initiative, €1 million of which was ring-fenced to combat illegal dumping activities arising from the COVID-19 crisis. This funding supported over 300 projects nationwide during 2020, including a national anti-dumping awareness communications campaign, "Your Country - Your Waste", which I launched in November 2020.

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My Department also funds local authorities and the WERLAs through the annual Local Authority Waste Enforcement Measures Grant scheme, which supports the recruitment and retention of over 150 local authority waste enforcement personnel nationwide.

The use of CCTV and other audio-visual recording (AVR) equipment to assist waste enforcement efforts is primarily an operational matter for local authorities, but I intend to amend the Waste Management Acts to data-proof waste enforcement legislation.

## **Environmental Policy**

112. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress INFOMAR has made in mapping the south-west coast of Ireland; and the way in which this data can be used to support renewable energy goals. [13294/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Information on INFOMAR progress to date and operational plans for 2021 can be found on the INFOMAR website, [www.infomar.ie](http://www.infomar.ie).

The INFOMAR programme is an important source of accurate information on seafloor conditions for Ireland’s marine territory. This knowledge is of crucial importance for the development of Offshore Renewable Energy in Ireland as it provides a unique source of data and knowledge forming a reliable baseline and reference for key activities in the sector, including preliminary assessment of seafloor conditions for site selection.

*Question No. 113 answered with Question No. 60.*

## **National Broadband Plan**

114. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress to date with the roll-out of the National Broadband Plan; the expected percentage take-up of this broadband per house or business passed; the current expected cost of the plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1011/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Design work on the National Broadband Plan is complete or ongoing in target townlands across every county in Ireland with over 186,000 premises surveyed as of 3 March. This survey work is feeding into detailed designs for each deployment area and the first fibre to the home connections are connected and in a test and trial phase in Carrigaline, Co Cork. They will be subject to technical testing and validation prior to a wider release of the area. In the coming months retailers will be able to resell the service and householders in these areas will be able to order high speed broadband provided via the NBI network. A test and trial phase in Cavan and Galway will also commence shortly.

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 3 March, 287 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible locations and the Department of Education for schools.

School BCPs will be provided with high speed broadband for educational use only and 106 schools have been connected as of 3 March. An acceleration of this aspect of the project has

been announced which will see some 679 primary schools connected to high speed broadband by end-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/>.

Recent indicators from commercial deployment suggest a high level of take up can be expected of the high speed broadband services that will be provided by the NBP. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance and value of high speed broadband across Ireland and it is expected that future demand for remote working and other services will further drive early take up of services provided over the NBP network.

The maximum possible cost to the State will be €2.7bn over 25 years. This includes up to €500m for conditional/contingency subsidy and approximately €100m in VAT. The Revenue Commissioners have determined that VAT will not apply to core subsidy payments to NBI hence the reduction in the overall project cost of about €270m to approximately €2.7bn as compared to €2.977 billion when the contract was signed.

### **Post Office Network**

115. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the engagement he has had with other Departments with regard to developing a financial sustainability plan for the post office network; the analysis of international best practice that has been carried out by his Department with regard to the development and sustainability of the post office network; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12888/21]

*Awaiting reply from the Department.*

*Question No. 116 answered with Question No. 64.*

### **Renewable Energy Generation**

117. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will liaise with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to remove the planning restrictions and therefore financial barriers to schools that wish to use solar panels and contribute to the Just Transition of energy within Ireland's climate need and commitments; and if so, the speed with which schools can expect such removal and assistance given the urgent circumstances of climate change. [12762/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Planning policy is a matter for the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. My Department, under Action 30 of the Climate Action Plan, has engaged extensively with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to review the existing planning exemptions for rooftop solar PV micro-generation. That Department has agreed to update the existing exemptions that will include provision for apartments, community and educational buildings including schools and expect that these interim regulations will be completed and submitted to the relevant Oireachtas Committee in Quarter 2 this year.

These regulations will need to be accompanied by Aviation Safeguarding Maps related to the construction of solar installations in the vicinity of aviation sites including heli-pads, aerodromes and major airports. In recognition of the length of time that it is expected to take to complete the aviation safeguarding maps, the Department of Housing has decided to adopt the interim measure outlined above which would allow the revised regulations to be introduced

prior to the completion of these maps, but with defined exclusion zones around airports and aerodromes for solar installations. The overall process for updating the solar panel planning exemptions to include the completed aviation safeguarding maps for airports and aerodromes along with the finalized Statutory Instrument will be brought through the legislative process as provided for under section 262(4) of the Planning and Development Act requiring the approval of both Houses of the Oireachtas, which it is anticipated will be completed later in 2021.

A Micro-Generation working group, chaired by my Department, is developing an enabling framework for micro-generation which tackles existing barriers and establishes suitable supports within relevant market segments. The proposed support mechanism was outlined in a public consultation (now closed) last month and the submissions received are currently being reviewed.

The Programme for Government commits to prioritising the development of micro-generation of electricity primarily for self-consumption, and a suitable payment for excess electricity generated on site and exported to the grid will be available to all micro-generators in the second half of 2021, subject to regulatory arrangements, in line with Articles 21 and 22 of the recast Renewable Energy Directive.

### **Telecommunications Infrastructure**

118. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress of the new national digital strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13293/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government commits to developing a new National Digital Strategy which will utilise the increased level of national connectivity that is being delivered by the National Broadband Plan. Preliminary work, co-ordinated by the Department of the Taoiseach, had been undertaken on a draft strategy in the lifetime of the previous Government and the experience of Covid-19 has only emphasised the importance of digital technologies to people's daily lives.

It is anticipated that further work on digitalisation will be undertaken as the plans for economic recovery are developed and lessons are learnt from how Irish society has deployed and relied upon digital technology during the pandemic.

### **Climate Change Policy**

119. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if his attention has been drawn to the fact that wood pellets are being imported from Australia; his views on the carbon footprint involved in importing such products over such a distance; the level of the importation of such alternatives; his views on the way this is compatible with environmental policy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13076/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** 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 at the latest. A key aspect of delivering on this ambition will be enacting the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill, which will underpin the on-going development of policies and measures. If Ireland is to meet its green-

house gas emissions reduction commitments, it is essential that we continue to drive the diversification of our energy mix away from fossil fuels. The requirement to diversify energy supply must be balanced with the need to secure indigenous supply and the carbon footprint associated with importing fuels.

In this context, Ireland operates within the framework of European Union legislation. The EU has recently revised the Renewable Energy Directive to include strict criteria in relation to the sustainability of biomass fuels. These criteria are due to be transposed into national legislation later this year.

While my Department does not gather data in relation to the import of wood pellets, the Support Scheme for Renewable Heat (SSRH) has been developed to financially support and stimulate the adoption of renewable heating systems by commercial, industrial, agricultural, district heating and other non-domestic heat users. The SSRH, which is operated by the SEAI, provides an operational support for biomass boilers and anaerobic digestion heating systems. Eligible renewable energy technologies are supported through a multi-annual payment, for a period of up to 15 years, on the basis of prescribed tariffs. The National Development Plan sets out an allocation of €300 million for the roll-out of the scheme for the period up to 2027. The introduction of these schemes provides an indirect stimulus to the indigenous wood pellet industry.

More broadly, the 2019 Climate Action Plan included a number of commitments to support the use of biomass to increase the level of renewable energy in the heat sector and, in the context of forestry policy, to seek to bridge the short term supply gap in indigenous biomass. Actions to further stimulate the promotion of the domestic biomass supply chain, as part of the overall development of a new strategy for the forestry sector, will form part of 2021 Climate Action Plan.

### **Energy Efficiency**

120. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans for changes to the various SEAI schemes and grants available to private homeowners to make their homes more energy efficient; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1466/21]

182. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to incentivise and support households to undertake retrofitting and other energy efficiency measures to help combat climate change; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1415/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 120 and 182 together.

The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set ambitious targets to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2/cost optimal and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings over the next 10 years. €221.5 million in capital funding has been provided this year for SEAI residential and community retrofit programmes. This represents an 82% increase on the 2020 allocation and is the largest amount ever for the schemes. This allocation is kick-starting the first phase of our retrofit plan. Of this amount, €109 million is al-

located to provide free upgrades for lower income households. This is a €47 million increase on the 2020 allocation. €112.5 million will be spent on expanding other existing SEAI grant schemes and introducing new and improved ones. The first of the new schemes was launched in September when a call for projects under the new National Retrofit (One-Stop-Shop Development) scheme issued. A €30 million call for projects under the Communities Energy Grant scheme was launched in November. Examples of other initiatives to commence in 2021 and now in development include a new National Retrofit scheme focused on achieving B2 retrofits; a heat-pump ready homes campaign and a new Community Activation Scheme. *Question No. 121 answered with Question No. 97. Question No. 122 answered with Question No. 71.*

### **National Broadband Plan**

123. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of broadband roll-out in Clogheen, County Tipperary. [13259/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** There are 29,759 premises located within the National Broadband Plan State Led Intervention Area of County Tipperary. As of 3 March, some 8,643 (29%) of the premises have been surveyed. These include areas near to Tipperary Town and the surrounding townlands of Aherloe, Ballinalard and Bansha. Survey are progressing in the Roscea area and surrounding townlands, Cashel, Townspark, Boherlahan, Goolds Cross, Knockavilla, Garrenroe, Camus Bridge, Golden, Shanballa, Dogstown, Racecourse Cross, Rosegreen, Knockbrett, Mayfield, Boscobell and Dualla. Cloheen is in the Cahir deployment area which covers approximately 3,000 premises. Surveys are due to commence in the area in August and are due to be completed by the end of 2021.

Further details are available on specific areas within Tipperary 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](http://www.nbi.ie). Individuals who register with this facility will receive regular updates on progress by NBI on delivering the network and specific updates related to their own premises when works are due to commence. I am advised that NBI is working to provide more detail on its website, with a rolling update on network build plans.

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of 3 March, 287 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible locations and the Department of Education for schools. Moyglass Community Hall, Killurney Community Centre and Aglish Community Centre have now been connected with high speed publicly accessible broadband. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

*Question No. 124 answered with Question No. 105.*

### **Just Transition Commissioner**

125. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the just transition plan; when he will establish a just transition commissioner as a statutory office; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45099/20]

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

The Programme for Government included a commitment to publish a Just Transition Plan to identify and prepare for challenges that will arise in a number of sectors and regions, recognising that there will be a variety of different transitions. A number of reports and plans focused on just transition, currently under development, will address this commitment. These include the implementation plan in relation to the Midlands to address the recommendations in the first report of the Just Transition Commissioner; the 2021 Climate Action Plan; and the Territorial Just Transition Plan to underpin the EU Just Transition Fund.

The Government appointed Mr Kieran Mulvey as the Just Transition Commissioner to facilitate discussions and work with stakeholders to develop, mobilise and deliver opportunities for the Midlands for both the workers directly affected and the wider community.

The Commissioner is undertaking his work with administrative support provided by my Department. The Commissioner is also being supported in his engagements with stakeholders in the Midlands, as required, by the Secretariat to the Midlands Regional Transition Team. The existing Interdepartmental Group, chaired by the Department of the Taoiseach, is also available to provide any assistance necessary as the Commissioner's work proceeds.

While I am currently considering the ongoing role for the Just Transition Commissioner in the context of the Programme for Government commitments as well as the implementation of the respective plans referred to above, my objective is to continue to support this work on the basis of the arrangements currently in place.

**Departmental Advertising**

126. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Taoiseach the amount spent by his Department on advertising in relation to Covid-19, by month and by media outlet (details supplied), from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021. [12323/21]

**The Taoiseach:** The table details the figures requested by the Deputy.

Month of Payment	Campaign name:	National Newspapers	Regional Newspapers	National Radio	Regional/Local Radio
June 2020	Emergency Business Supports	€229,784.05	n/a	€158,403.39	€94,738.42
June 2020	Use of Outdoor/ Public Spaces	€140,178.93	n/a	€111,335.78	€153,520.97
June 2020	14 Day Restrictions	€135,291.73	n/a	€114,230.08	€209,051.48
June 2020	Community Call	€169,445.63	€409,296.64	€440,295.17	€621,149.69
July 2020	Business Supports - SMEs	€190,532.26	€280,116.75	€214,603.33	€199,651.77
July 2020	Wellbeing	€97,768.92	€170,597.92	€171,050.80	€224,945.73
July 2020	Reopening Roadmap	€146,868.95	€156,743.26	€133,371.60	€306,608.61
Sept 2020	Business Reopening - Return to Work Safely Protocol	€146,325.93	€165,607.55	€185,020.59	€229,620.06
Sept 2020	Leaving Certificate	€47,457.94	€0.00	€0.00	€0.00
Sept 2020	Phase 1 Reopening	€193,870.75	€333,465.39	€221,827.69	€264,575.47
Sept 2020	Business Reopening - RTW 2	€49,606.13	€170,282.97	€167,977.30	€173,256.56
Sept 2020	Phase 2 Reopening	€143,412.46	€167,010.97	€196,914.51	€247,538.07
Sept 2020	Phase 3 Reopening	€239,517.92	€344,367.04	€224,815.88	€237,340.55

Month of Payment	Campaign name:	National Newspapers	Regional Newspapers	National Radio	Regional/Local Radio
Sept 2020	Personal Responsibility	€0.00	€0.00	€146,225.51	€201,950.31
Sept 2020	Travel	€143,412.46	€0.00	€68,141.56	€95,989.01
Oct 2020	Phase 4 Reopening - July Delay	€143,412.46	€172,804.78	€164,525.87	€215,979.27
Oct 2020	July Jobs Stimulus	€96,106.53	€178,314.44	€81,639.53	€126,740.32
Oct 2020	Travel Green List	€47,307.00	€0.00	€52,471.57	€64,700.30
Oct 2020	Phase 4 Reopening - August Delay	€0.00	€0.00	€59,194.91	€106,271.14
Oct 2020	3 Counties Restrictions Regional	€0.00	€18,234.12	€0.00	€34,378.48
Oct 2020	3 Counties Restrictions National	€0.00	€0.00	€53,560.25	€0.00
Oct 2020	Additional National Measures (August)	€47,305.93	€189,289.96	€78,652.33	€113,625.90
Nov 2020	Dublin/Limerick High incidence awareness	€123,780.89	€30,988.49	€114,492.36	€69,428.97
Nov 2020	Living with COVID Framework (incl. Dublin Level 3)	€143,413.52	€189,495.09	€178,172.35	€179,228.98
Nov 2020	Donegal Level 3 (Sept)	€123,781.96	€0.00	€27,485.25	€25,068.58
Nov 2020	Reinforcing Public Health Messaging Nationwide	€76,474.96	€0.00	€0.00	€0.00
Nov 2020	Nationwide Level 3 (Oct)	€47,307.00	€0.00	€89,519.94	€81,161.97
Nov 2020	3 Counties L4 / National L3 update	€0.00	€0.00	€29,320.74	€1,975.44
Nov 2020	Nationwide Level 5 (Oct)	€47,305.93	€0.00	€73,424.73	€64,930.00
Nov 2020	Keep Well - Community Wellbeing	€76,474.96	€189,495.09	€154,804.64	€187,321.99

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

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

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

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

Last Spring a number of campaigns were run as restrictions were initially imposed at the onset of the pandemic in order to explain the measures and to reinforce public health messages. Other campaigns focussed on specific sectors and topics, including supports for business, the

postponement of the Leaving Certificate, the Return to Work and Community Wellbeing campaigns.

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

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

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

The AntiViral campaign, launched in December, aims to engage with those aged 18-24, recognising that they have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

This campaign is a way to demonstrate the positive role that our young people are playing in beating back this virus. It has had over 5.7 million interactions on the social platforms and reached over 300,000 people in that age demographic. The AntiViral hashtag had over 1.1 million views and the campaign's positive sentiment was measured at over 60%.

Also in December, there were campaigns to inform citizens of the advice for having a safe Christmas with family and friends, and guidance on shopping safely, to reinforce public health messaging.

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

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

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

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

Invoices for the campaigns run during Winter 2020 and Spring 2021 are currently being processed for payment.

### **Departmental Consultations**

127. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 9 to 11, inclusive, of 9 December 2020, if he will report on any other consultancy work that has been commissioned by his Department. [43178/20]

**The Taoiseach:** My Department has not engaged any consultancy firms nor incurred any expenditure on consultancy in relation to COVID-19 or any other matters throughout 2020.

10 March 2021

As stated in my previous reply, my Department is working with the HSE and their contractors EY, the CSO, and a number of other Departments, to draw together existing data outputs to maximise the insights that can be gained.

This builds on the existing strong work across Government Departments to better inform the cross-Government COVID-19 response.

The objective is to integrate data and insights across a variety of internal and external sources.

### **Departmental Internships**

128. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Taoiseach the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under his aegis in 2019; the cost in terms of wages and allowances; and the estimated numerical capacity of State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis. [12963/21]

**The Taoiseach:** The National Economic and Social Development Office (NESDO), the only body under the aegis of my Department, accommodated two third-level students on internships during 2019 on an unpaid basis.

NESDO has a capacity to provide work experience and internships on an unpaid basis to four third-level students on an annual basis.

### **EU Issues**

129. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if Ireland is supportive of the EU Commission's legislative initiative on mandatory and human rights due diligence for EU companies in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12522/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I understand the Deputy may be referring to the EU Commission's forthcoming proposal on sustainable corporate governance expected in Summer 2021. As outlined by the EU Commission this may include measures to require companies to take actions to address their adverse impacts on social and environmental matters including human rights by way of a due diligence duty.

Certainly, the matters signalled are of great importance and any EU legislative proposals will be examined carefully and subject to consultation with stakeholders to inform Ireland's position. The proposals shall be considered from the perspective of Ireland's support for human rights, their feasibility for companies and their directors having particular regard to SMEs, and the effectiveness of the proposals in meeting their objectives.

In parallel, there is already an obligation on certain large companies in the EU to publish annually non-financial information in respect of their social and environmental impact including on matters such as human rights and climate change or explain where they do not. The EU is reviewing the Non-Financial Reporting Directive (2014/95/EU) with the objective of improving the way this information is made publicly available including the question of developing an EU standard to enhance these non-financial disclosures. A legislative proposal is expected in April 2021.

I look forward to the receiving the EU Commission's proposals and to Ireland taking an active part in progressing these important and positive developments.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

130. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will review the classification of school clothing and school supplies under the level 5 plan following the start of the phased return of schools and the significant associated pressures on parents at this time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12943/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** 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 (<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/1f150-view-statutory-instruments-related-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/>) clearly sets out the temporary restrictions under Level 5. A list of essential services can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c9158-essential-services/> and the list of essential retail outlets at Level 5 can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/60ecc-essential-retail-outlets-for-level-5/>

Under Level 5, only essential retail outlets will remain open and all measures in Level 5 will stay in place until at least April 5 2021. Further information can be found on <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/> Clothing products can be ordered remotely for delivery and are also available on compassionate grounds as circumstances arise.

The decision on the categorisation of essential services and/or essential retail outlets is not primarily a matter for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

It is important to monitor gov.ie for the latest information, public health advice and guidelines from Government in relation to COVID-19.

### **Redundancy Payments**

131. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if the board of a group (details supplied) communicated to him its intention to disregard an agreed severance package and proceed with a reduced package following the consultation period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13054/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I extend my sympathies to the workers in the Rehab Group who are in danger of losing their jobs. I fully appreciate how difficult the situation is for those involved and for their families.

The Protection of Employment Act 1977 imposes a number of obligations on employers who are proposing collective redundancies including an obligation under sections 9 and 10 to engage in an information and consultation process with employees' representatives and to provide certain information relating to the proposed redundancies. Section 11A of the Act provides that, where an employee believes the employer to be in breach of sections 9 or 10, they may pursue a complaint to the Workplace Relations Commission. It is also an offence under section 11 of the Act where an employer fails to comply with sections 9 or 10.

There is also an obligation under section 12 which makes it mandatory on employers proposing a collective redundancy to notify the Minister for Enterprise, Trade & Employment of

the proposed collective redundancy. My Department received notification of the proposed redundancies in the Rehab Group on 17th February 2021.

It is the employer's responsibility by law to pay statutory redundancy to eligible employees. Negotiations on enhanced redundancy packages over and above the statutory entitlement are a voluntary matter between an employer and its employees and the Government has no role in this.

The Government will work in a coordinated way to assist any person who loses their job. My colleague Heather Humphreys T.D. the Minister for Social Protection would be best placed to advise further on supports for jobseekers with disabilities, including the EmployAbility service which is an employment and recruitment service that helps people who have a disability to secure and maintain employment.

Finally, the Workplace Relations Commission provides information on employment, equality and industrial relations rights and obligations, and can be contacted at Lo-call 1890 80 80 90 or via its website [www.workplacerelations.ie](http://www.workplacerelations.ie).

### **Economic Data**

132. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the current ranking of Ireland on the Digital Economy and Society Index; the plans to improve Ireland's position on the index, with particular reference to comparison with EU counterparts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13230/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The Digital Economy and Society Index Report (DESI) is a composite index that summarises five relevant indicators (Connectivity, Human Capital, Use of Internet Services, Integration of digital technology by businesses, Digital public services) on Europe's digital performance and tracks the evolution of EU member states in digital competitiveness.

Ireland is now ranked in 6th place, an improved performance on the 2019 index. Over the last five years, Ireland has made continuous improvements in these rankings.

Ireland continues to rank first in the Integration of Digital Technology dimension and has maintained a leading position in the use of e-Commerce by SMEs. It entered the top 10 on the use of Internet by individuals and recorded a notable increase in the share of internet users. It maintained its top 10 position in Digital Public Services, where it excels in open data and the provision of digital public services for businesses. Digital transformation continues to be a core policy priority.

An area where Ireland shows scope for improvement is in the Connectivity dimension, we are currently 23rd on the index, with Denmark, Sweden and Luxembourg leading the pack with the highest scores. It is anticipated that the roll out of the National Broadband Plan will improve our position on this dimension going forward.

### **Work Permits**

133. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of a matter (details supplied) in relation to critical skills employment permits for immigrant non-consultant hospital doctors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13645/21]

140. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he has considered allowing non-consultant hospital doctors to access the critical skills employment permit which they cannot access given that they relocate regularly due to the nature of their employment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13150/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 133 and 140 together.

The employment permits system is designed to facilitate the entry of appropriately skilled non-EEA nationals to fill skills and/or labour shortages, however, this objective must be balanced by the need to ensure that there are no suitably qualified Irish/EEA nationals available to undertake the work and that the shortage is a genuine one. The employment permits system is managed through the operation of the critical skills and the ineligible occupations lists which determine employments that are either in high demand or are ineligible for consideration for an employment permit.

Doctors, including non-consultant hospital doctors (NCHDs), are on the critical skills list and are eligible for the Critical Skills Employment Permit. The Critical Skills Employment Permit is Ireland's premium employment permit and is targeted at highly skilled people in eligible occupations deemed to be critically important to growing Ireland's economy, are highly demanded and highly skilled, and in significant shortage of supply in our labour market. This permit provides for immediate family reunification, broad access to the labour market for dependents, spouses and partners as well as fast tracking to long term residency after two years. The criteria attached to this permit type includes the requirement for the non EEA national to have secured a job offer of two years.

The employment permits legislation applies a range of criteria when considering an application for an employment permit including the remuneration offered and the period of employment as set out in the contract of employment provided with the application. The duration of the employment offered to any non EEA national, for any employment, is a contractual arrangement between the employer and the employee and my Department has no role in this regard.

My Department has worked with the HSE to put in place a process that allows for up to two year, multi-site applications for Doctors, including NCHDs, for employment permits but any agreement on duration of individual employment contracts is a matter for the HSE and the doctor concerned.

The new Employment Permits (Consolidation and Amendment) Bill proposes to include provisions to streamline employment permit processes and improve agility by moving some of the operational detail from primary legislation to regulation including duration of an employment permit which would allow adjustment to be made more easily in response to changes in industry practices.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

134. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment when the Covid-19 business aid scheme will be open for applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12563/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** As you are aware, I recently announced a new €60m Covid Business Scheme. The aim of this scheme is to provide grants to businesses ineligible for the Government's other existing schemes such as CRSS and is designed to help with fixed costs. Wholesalers, suppliers, caterers

and events companies down 75% or more in turnover and in receipt of a rates bill may benefit, including those that commenced after the 1st November 2019 where their turnover is below projections.

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

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

The details of the Scheme are currently being finalised and I plan to launch it in the coming days.

### **Flexible Work Practices**

135. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his Department has carried out research into the profiling of workers' electronic equipment by employers, given reports internationally of the increasing use of monitoring software and privacy-busting software to track workers throughout the working day. [12646/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Privacy and data protection concerns are a matter for the Data Protection Commissioner.

The ICT measures referred to by the Deputy to monitor employees are not matters which are provided for within the suite of employment rights law or in the context of the information required under the Terms of Employment (Information) Act, 1994.

### **Trade Missions**

136. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his Department is considering a virtual trade mission to Singapore during the second quarter of 2021. [12694/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Each year, Enterprise Ireland offers a programme of trade missions and events which support the goal of securing high-level market access for companies based in Ireland who are aiming to grow business overseas and increase domestic employment.

In recent years the majority of Ministerial-led Trade Missions have taken place to the Eurozone, North America and Asia Pacific, which represented the strongest growth opportunities for Irish companies. These Trade Missions focused on promoting the innovative capabilities and competitive offerings of Irish companies to international buyers in sectors including internationally traded services, fintech, high-tech construction, engineering, ICT and lifesciences.

Trade missions will be taking place virtually and, where possible, physically during 2021. In relation to Singapore, Minister Robert Troy will be attending a virtual "Airports of the Future" event in the coming weeks at the request of Enterprise Ireland to support Irish firms.

My Department continues to work closely with its agencies to assess opportunities to help Irish companies to access new markets and to increase the levels of foreign direct investment into Ireland, including in markets in the Asia-Pacific region such as Singapore.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

137. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will consider removing the eligibility criteria for the Covid-19 business aid scheme that states a business must be in a rateable premises (details supplied). [12869/21]

**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.

As you mention I recently announced a new €60m Covid Aid Scheme 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 compensation for loss of personal income above this level or compensation for loss of profits for any sector.

### **Business Regulation**

138. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if concerns will be addressed in relation to increased customer and business costs following the requirement that all wooden packaging materials (details supplied) must meet ISPM15 standards by undergoing heat treatment and marking; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12911/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The Government has been working to prepare for Brexit for several years – with intensive effort across many Departments and Agencies, including legislation, supports for business and

other sectors, stakeholder outreach and widespread public communications to promote readiness. Details of the business Brexit Supports available from my Department can be found at: Brexit Business Supports - DETE (enterprise.gov.ie)

My Department and the Enterprise Agencies provide a significant number of Brexit supports including planning vouchers, consultancy and mentoring supports, the Enterprise Ireland Ready for Customs Grant of up to €9,000, as well as financial supports for adapting and restructuring business models and grants for research into new markets to assist companies respond to the new trading environment.

ISPM 15 “Regulation of Wood Packaging Material in International Trade” is a phytosanitary standard developed by the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC). It sets down standards for treatment and marking of Wood Packaging Material (WPM) which includes pallets, crates and dunnage used in the international trade of goods of all kinds. SPM15 is a requirement for WPM entering the EU from third countries. From 1 January 2021 all WPM moving between the UK and the EU must meet ISPM15 international standards by undergoing heat treatment and marking.

I fully appreciate that the introduction of new import and export regulatory requirements alongside new checks and controls on trade between the EU and UK, excluding Northern Ireland, adds additional burdens on companies. This will take time to readjust and was one of Government’s key messages to businesses in advance of Brexit i.e. to ensure that businesses and their UK suppliers use the international standard ISPM 15 standard wood pallets for imports and exports of goods. Our Departments and Agencies are continuing to engage with companies and haulage and logistics companies to help them work through the new trading environment.

Supporting businesses to adapt to these changes has been a priority of the Government’s Brexit Readiness preparations. Financial, advisory, consultancy and upskilling supports are available to assist businesses adjust to this new trading environment, details of which are available at [www.gov.ie/brexit](http://www.gov.ie/brexit).

My colleague, Charlie McConalogue TD, Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine has oversight for the administration of the treatment and manufacture of WPM to ISPM 15 standard and may be able to assist you further.

### Departmental Internships

139. **Deputy Louise O’Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under his aegis in 2019; the cost in terms of wages and allowances; and the estimated numerical capacity of State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis. [12952/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State Agencies under the aegis of my Department in 2019, the cost of these placements, and the estimated numerical capacity of these Agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis is outlined below in tabular form:

Agency	No. of students on work experience/ internship in 2019	Total pay-related cost for students on work experience/internship in 2019	Estimated average annual capacity for students on work experience/internship
IAASA	0	N/A	N/A

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Agency	No. of students on work experience/ internship in 2019	Total pay-related cost for students on work experience/internship in 2019	Estimated average annual capacity for students on work experience/internship
CCPC	5	0	5
NSAI	3	€34,291	5
IDA	0	N/A	N/A
Enterprise Ireland	25 (Jan – May 2019); 25 (June – Dec 2019)	€464,564 (Salary & Employer's PRSI)*	25**
PIAB	0	N/A	N/A
HSA	0	N/A	N/A

\*Pay rate for student internships (3rd Level students) is at minimum wage.

\*\*EI placements are for 11 months commencing in June each year and continuing until May the following year. In one calendar year (Jan – Dec) EI may have up to 50 individual students on placement for a period, however the maximum number of placements at any one time is typically no more than 25.

N/A means no internships/student opportunities available.

*Question No. 140 answered with Question No. 133.*

### Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

141. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will address the issues raised in correspondence by a company (details supplied) in Dublin 11; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13185/21]

**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 have had to make sacrifices in order to protect their community. 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 check if they are eligible and availing of 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 understand businesses' frustration in regards the rate paying criteria. 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 compensation for loss of personal income above this level or compensation for loss of profits for any sector.

## National Broadband Plan

142. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the outcome of his meeting with National Broadband Ireland to discuss the acceleration of the national broadband plan; and if the roll-out will be accelerated. [13341/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I met with National Broadband Ireland (NBI) last week for an update on their progress with the National Broadband Plan. The National Broadband Plan is the biggest investment in rural Ireland since rural electrification. NBI informed me of their progress to date. Government will continue to engage with NBI over the coming months. If the plan can be speeded up, it will be speeded up.

## Flexible Work Practices

143. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will report on the development of a remote working hub in Adamstown, County Dublin. [13374/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I am not aware of the development of a remote working hub in Adamstown, County Dublin.

However, currently there is an Enterprise Ireland open 'Regional Development Feasibility Fund' that promoters, looking to scope out and investigate the viability of larger full-scale projects such as remote working hubs, can apply for. A feasibility grant of €15,000 or 50% of eligible costs, whichever is lesser, is available to qualifying applicants meeting the required criteria.

In addition, on 20 November 2020, I announced €8.24m in grants for 95 Enterprise Centres around the country administered through Enterprise Ireland. The funding will ensure that the Enterprise Centres, many of which have been negatively impacted by COVID-19, can sustain their businesses, pivot and further develop their services to support the next wave of Irish start-up companies. Enterprise Centres provide important infrastructure for entrepreneurs and are an essential part of the start-up ecosystem across Ireland. The Centres, many of which are regionally based, provide space, mentoring and support to start-up founders and teams, helping them to scale internationally.

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. An important 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. Enterprise Ireland is actively working to support the implementation of this strategy through:

- mapping and classification of hubs;
- mapping regional and local need to inform future investment in enterprise centres/hubs; and
- investment in remote work hubs and infrastructure in underserved areas thus underpinning the development of the national hubs network.

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. This investment has enabled:

- Establishment of physical space for entrepreneurs, start-ups, scaling companies, SMEs and a balance of small scale FDI;
- Delivery of enterprise relevant programmes to companies; and
- Provision of physical space to support remote working.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

144. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he has considered the submissions made by an organisation and a company (details supplied) relative to the negative impact that the ongoing lockdown is having on the construction industry and the completion of large scale office and accommodation projects; if his attention has been drawn to unease in the foreign investor community arising from lockdown and the uncertainty of the immediate future; his views on damage to the reputation of Ireland from the prolonged lockdown and the effects on foreign direct investment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13469/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** 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 introduction of the new restrictions followed advice from NPHE 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.

In accordance with the Public Health advice, the additional restrictions required construction activity to cease from Friday 8 January. The Government agreed a limited number of exemptions from these restrictions. These exemptions, which are set out in S.I. 4 of 2021, allow for the continuation of construction and development projects which are necessary for maintenance of supply chains in respect of certain manufacturing or information and communication services. The manufacturing and information and communication services include: chemicals, pharmaceutical products, medical devices, IT equipment, products necessary for national and international supply chains, personal hygiene products, broadband, data centres, etc. This has allowed certain key projects in the Exporting/FDI sector to continue.

While I am not aware of the submission referenced by the Deputy, I am, of course, acutely aware of the ongoing impact the pandemic is having on our economy, and the challenges faced by the construction industry. Our approach will continue to be guided by the public health advice and will be kept under review. The current restrictions will remain in place until 5 April, when the issue of any potential easing of restrictions relating to construction will be considered further.

### **Customs and Excise**

145. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the developments that have been made in addressing the issues in relation to rules of origin for goods that pass through UK from the European Union that are unloaded and then reloaded and delivered to Ireland, resultantly losing their free trade and single market status.

[13521/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I am acutely aware that particular issues have emerged, and continue to emerge, for stakeholders as we all seek to implement the new EU-UK trade arrangements under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) consequent on Brexit. These are the inevitable outworkings of Brexit, a policy choice by the UK with which we did not agree, with the UK now a “Third Country” from a trade policy perspective having exited the EU’s Single Market and Customs Union as of 1 January this year. One such issue is where the UK acts as a distribution hub for goods, including those sourced from the EU, as referenced by Deputy O’Reilly.

In that regard, “Rules of Origin” are the premise upon which any Free Trade Agreement (FTA) seeks to confer the preferential tariff rates - zero in the case of the TCA - on the members of the Free Trade Area encompassed by the FTA, namely the UK and EU-27 in this instance. The TCA outlines the conditions which have to be met for goods to avail of a preferential tariff when moving between the EU and the UK. The primary condition is that goods being exported to Ireland from the UK must be of UK origin to avail of the 0% tariff rate and goods being imported to the UK from Ireland must be of EU (including Irish) origin to avail of the 0% tariff rate on entering the UK.

As the Deputy points out, goods can potentially lose their Union origin if they at any point exit customs supervision or are released into free circulation after they leave the EU as they transit to Ireland. Having regard to the Union Customs Code, which sets out the rules applicable for goods brought into or taken out of the customs territory of the Union, on 27 January this year, the Revenue Commissioners issued eCustoms Notification 14/2021 which provides guidance and scenarios for the movement of goods from the EU to Ireland through the UK whereby the tariff may not be incurred.

For example, where the movement of the goods through the UK is a requirement, Revenue have advised that consideration could be given to using the “transit procedure” provisions of the Union Customs Code. Under this mechanism, where EU originating goods are brought into the UK from an EU Member State, the goods can be stored in a customs warehouse in the UK and not lose their EU preferential origin thereby not incurring a tariff. In this connection, there is a requirement to have a customs warehousing authorisation from HM Revenue & Customs (HMRC) in the UK and HMRC provide advice on the rules and requirements relating to the Customs Warehouse procedure in the UK, including the conditions associated with the operations which can be carried out on the goods while they are in the warehouse.

This Revenue Commissioners’ Guidance also addresses Inward Processing and Returned Goods options.

Alternatively, where there is no need for the goods to transit through the UK as part of the import, the direct movement of goods from the EU to Ireland should be considered as an option by Irish importers thereby avoiding the goods leaving the EU Customs Union or Single Market. Therefore, if goods travel directly from the EU to Ireland, for example from a port in France, Belgium or the Netherlands, the goods have not left the Single Market and the Customs Union and thereby remain in free circulation in the Union. In this regard, connectivity between Ireland and Continental Europe has been significantly enhanced through additional direct ferry sailings/capacity.

I should also add that my Department and the Enterprise Agencies are in constant contact with industry bodies including through our Enterprise Forum and the Retail Forum to identify where sectoral and regional impacts of the TCA are emerging at an operational level. We have a large number of Brexit supports including planning vouchers, consultancy and mentoring sup-

ports, the Enterprise Ireland Ready for Customs Grant of up to €9,000, as well as financial supports for adapting and restructuring business models and grants for research into new markets to assist companies respond to the new TCA dispensation.

Enterprise Ireland hosted a webinar last month on *'Rules of Origin: How Rules of Origin affect your business to trade to, from or through the UK'*. The webinar focused on the implications of rules of origin for Irish businesses, and some solutions that can help to resolve the current challenges that businesses face. While the webinar was aimed at Enterprise Ireland and Local Enterprise Office clients, it was also open to all Irish companies that trade with the United Kingdom and my colleague, Minister Troy, participated in the webinar.

Finally, Budget 2021 provided contingency funding for COVID-19 and for all Brexit outcomes and the Government is committed to assisting firms on a dynamic basis in responding to Brexit, especially those firms that are in the most severely impacted sectors.

### Trade Data

146. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his Department will be appraising quarter two trading data between Ireland and the EU and Ireland and UK given that it will shed more light on the new trading reality compared with quarter one; if a paper will be published outlining the data; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13522/21]

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

In 2018, my Department, in conjunction with Copenhagen Economics, undertook a comprehensive study to consider the impact of Brexit on Ireland's trade and economy. Following agreement in October 2019 on the Withdrawal Agreement and the Political Declaration for the Future Relationship between the EU and the UK, my Department commissioned further economic modelling to reflect the benefits of the terms of the Agreement and Political Declaration/Protocol on Northern Ireland.

This Analysis forecast that growth levels over a decade would be 3.2 to 3.9 per cent below where it would otherwise be, depending on whether a "best-case" or "worst-case" scenario was modelled. This outcome showed a reduction by almost half in the adverse impacts on the Irish economy that had been forecast for a trading relationship with the UK based on WTO terms, and the study identified a lessening of the negative impacts envisaged for the more generic FTA modelled in the previous Copenhagen Economics analysis.

As regards undertaking a specific appraisal of trade data for the first two quarters of 2021, I believe it is too early to commence a meaningful impact assessment of the concluded EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) at this point as certain parts of the TCA and the Northern Ireland Protocol have grace periods or temporary derogations attached to them. Furthermore, a framework for regulatory cooperation in financial services between the EU and the UK is to be agreed by March 2021 and the EU is assessing the UK's data privacy regime before

deciding whether to grant a data adequacy decision in favour of the UK. In addition, further changes will be introduced by the UK on 1st April and 1st July in term of SPS certifications and inspections regimes. Therefore, we will not have sufficient statistical data available to assess the totality of the impact of the TCA until such temporary derogations and all elements of the Agreement are fully in force, including any further easements or derogations that may be agreed under the TCA structures. However, I am fully committed to such post-implementation evaluation at an appropriate point, as soon as sufficient statistical data are available. That assessment will have to take account of the impact which stockpiling ahead of 1st January and dampening in demand due to the pandemic, may have on such data, esp. as between the UK and Ireland.

In the meantime, in advance of a macro-economic assessment, I should note that my Department and the Enterprise Agencies are in constant contact with industry bodies including through the Enterprise Forum which I chair and the Retail Forum, chaired, by Minister Damien English, to identify where sectoral and regional impacts of the TCA are emerging at an operational level. In addition, Minister Robert Troy, in light of his responsibilities for trade promotion, has engaged in extensive outreach with business groups to address the many logistical challenges that the TCA has presented us with. We have a large number of Brexit supports including planning vouchers, consultancy and mentoring supports, the Enterprise Ireland Ready for Customs Grant of up to €9,000, as well as financial supports for adapting and restructuring business models and grants for research into new markets to assist companies respond to the new TCA dispensation. In addition, Budget 2021 provided contingency funding for COVID-19 and for all Brexit outcomes and the Government is committed to assisting firms on a dynamic basis in responding to Brexit, especially those firms that are in the most severely impacted sectors.

### Equality Issues

147. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he has read the research paper by a union (details supplied) which explores inequality and deprivation in Ireland. [13524/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I have not received nor had the opportunity to read the report referenced by the Deputy. I am advised it relates to deprivation and inequality in Ireland. I assure the Deputy these are priority areas for the Government.

### Departmental Advertising

148. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the amount spent across his Department on advertising in relation to Covid-19, by month and by media outlet (details supplied), from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021. [13557/21]

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

The following table sets out the funding spent on such campaigns by month, between 1st March 2020 and 1st March 2021.

[<ahref="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ic/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumenta-

## Natural Gas Imports

149. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to legislate for a ban on the importation of fracked gas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [45094/20]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government sets out that the Government does not support the importation of fracked gas and commits to developing a policy statement to establish that approach.

My Department is in the process of developing the policy statement, which includes the consideration of any necessary legislative and regulatory provisions. This includes detailed examination of the European energy and environmental frameworks, in which our national laws operate, to ensure the policy statement will be legally robust. Once finalised, I intend to bring the policy statement to Government for approval.

In addition, my Department is carrying out a review of the security of energy supply of Ireland’s electricity and natural gas systems which is focusing on the period to 2030 in the context of ensuring a sustainable pathway to 2050. The review will include a detailed technical analysis and a public consultation.

The review will inform future policy in relation to natural gas supplies, gas storage, electricity interconnection, emergency reserves and other measures that would enhance our security of supply. This will be done in the context of the doubling of the electricity generated from renewable sources to 70% of Ireland’s final consumption and the achievement of net zero emissions by 2050. I expect that the review will be completed by the end of 2021.

## Broadband Infrastructure

150. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when a property (details supplied) will be able to avail of broadband. [12496/21]

**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](http://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 3 March 2021, nearly 187,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Surveys are complete or underway in County Westmeath in the areas of Mullingar, Sonna, Stonehall, Taghmon, Jamestown, Hopestown, and Athlone. Pre-build works have commenced in the areas around Mullingar. I understand that surveying is underway in the deployment areas in which the premises referred to in the Question is located. Further details are available on specific areas within County Westmeath through

the NBI website which provides a facility for any premises within the intervention area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website [www.nbi.ie](http://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](mailto: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 3 March, 287 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 Streete Parish Park and Community Hall, Whitehall Community Centre (5.48 km from the premises), Milltown Emper Community Centre and Ballycomoye GAA Club. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

Scoil Naomh Michael is installed by NBI for educational access as part of this initiative and Scoil Náisiúnta Bhride is 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/>.

## Energy Efficiency

151. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the details of the forthcoming SEAI deep retrofit grant schemes for private individual homeowners; and when he expects to be in a position to launch such a scheme. [12507/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** A total of €221.5 million in capital funding has been provided for SEAI residential and community retrofit schemes this year. This represents an additional €100 million, or an 82% increase, on the 2020 allocation and is the largest ever budget for the schemes.

This funding has already enabled a call for projects under a new National Retrofit One-Stop-Shop Development Scheme and the Community Energy Grant scheme. Both of these schemes provide grant support for private individual homeowners to deep retrofit their homes. It has also allowed the budget for the Better Energy Homes Scheme and Warmer Homes Scheme to be increased and funded a heat pump ready homes campaign.

My Department is currently working with SEAI to develop a further scheme that will facilitate the retrofitting of homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2, at scale and managed by one stop shops. It is intended to launch the scheme in quarter 3 of this year.

## Illegal Dumping

152. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to combat fly tipping and illegal dumping; and if he will make a statement

on the matter. [12598/21]

154. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the amount each local authority spent in 2018, 2019 and 2020 cleaning up fly tipping and illegal dumping; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12600/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**  
I propose to take Questions Nos. 152 and 154 together.

My Department continues to work closely with both the EPA and the Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authorities through the National Waste Enforcement Steering Committee to ensure that the legislation in place is robust and effective in assisting their enforcement efforts. The Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy published in September 2020 contains a range of actions designed to enhance existing waste enforcement activity. 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.

These will all build on existing actions to combat illegal dumping such as the Anti-Dumping Initiative, which was launched by my Department in 2017, and has provided funding of €9.3 million to local authorities in support of over 1,000 projects. Last year alone €3m was allocated to local authorities in support of the Anti-Dumping Initiative, €1 million of which was ring-fenced to combat illegal dumping activities arising from the COVID-19 crisis. This funding supported over 300 projects nationwide during 2020, including a national anti-dumping awareness communications campaign, “Your Country - Your Waste”, which I launched in November 2020.

My Department also supports local authorities and Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authorities through the annual Local Authority Waste Enforcement Measures Grant scheme, which supports the recruitment and retention of over 150 local authority waste enforcement personnel nationwide. Questions in relation to the full annual cost of waste enforcement by each local authority should be direct towards individual local authorities.

### **Local Authority Staff**

153. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of litter wardens employed by each local authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12599/21]

155. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number and value of on-the-spot fines issued for littering in 2018, 2019 and 2020; the number of prosecutions and convictions in relation to same for the same periods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12601/21]

10 March 2021

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**  
I propose to take Questions Nos. 153 and 155 together.

The Litter Pollution Acts 1997 to 2009 provide the statutory framework to combat littering. Under the Acts, the primary management and enforcement response to littering is a matter for local authorities and each local authority must determine the most appropriate course of action to take to tackle litter pollution in their functional area, including staffing levels, public awareness, enforcement and clean-up actions, taking into account its own particular circumstances and priorities.

My Department does not hold statistics on the numbers of staff employed as litter wardens nor does it compile statistics on the number of prosecutions secured and convictions taken in relation to litter offences.

The EPA compiles comparative statistics on local authority performance relating to their litter 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](http://www.epa.ie). The 2019 report is due for publication shortly.

*Question No. 154 answered with Question No. 152.*

*Question No. 155 answered with Question No. 153.*

### **Programme for Government**

156. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the commitment in the Programme for Government to reduce polluting emissions by an average of 7% a year and by 51% in total by 2030 will be restated in the context of the commitments in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2020. [12616/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**  
I refer to the reply to Question No. [13252/21] on today's Order Paper.

### **Broadband Infrastructure**

157. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when a property (details supplied) will be able to avail of e-fibre broadband. [12666/21]

162. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when an area (details supplied) can expect to be surveyed under the national broadband plan given that all premises on the adjoining roads have access to fibre. [12750/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**  
I propose to take Questions Nos. 157 and 162 together.

The Questions refer 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](http://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 3 March 2021, nearly 187,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Surveys are complete or underway 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 premises within the intervention area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website [www.nbi.ie](http://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](mailto: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 3 March, 287 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 (5.6 Kilometres from the premises), Corlea Heritage Centre and Aughine Community Centre. Sites at Ballymore Shamrocks GAA Club (6.8 Kilometres from the premises) and Mullinalaghta Community Center 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/>.

## **Energy Efficiency**

158. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the pilot scheme to test key elements of the national retrofitting plan; the expected composition of the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12734/21]

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

A total of €221.5 million in capital funding has been provided for SEAI residential and community retrofit schemes this year. This represents an additional €100 million, or an 82% increase, on the 2020 allocation and is the largest ever budget for the schemes. Of this amount,

€109 million is allocated to provide free upgrades for lower income households with the balance of €112.5 million to be spent on expanding existing SEAI grant schemes and introducing new initiatives.

One such initiative is the National Home Retrofit Scheme (One Stop Shop Development Call). This new support scheme is designed to encourage the development of retrofit One-Stop-Shops, to support home retrofit on a larger scale, and support the growth of the retrofit industry. The scheme facilitates home upgrades for private households, registered Housing Associations and Local Authorities who wish to participate in delivering home energy efficiency upgrades. More details of this scheme, which has been well received by the market, are available on the SEAI website at <https://www.seai.ie/grants/national-home-retrofit/National-Home-Retrofit-Scheme-Guidelines.pdf>

My Department is also currently working with SEAI to develop other initiatives including a further scheme that will facilitate the retrofitting of homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2, at scale and managed by one stop shops. It is intended to launch the scheme in quarter 3 of this year.

*Questions Nos. 159 to 161, inclusive, answered with Question No. 62.*

*Question No. 162 answered with Question No. 157.*

### **Warmer Homes Scheme**

163. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the average cost for shallow works, deep works and deep works with heating upgrades under the warmer homes scheme. [12755/21]

164. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the criteria for deciding whether to complete shallow, deep works or deep works with heating upgrade under the warmer homes scheme. [12756/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**  
I propose to take Questions Nos. 163 and 164 together.

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.

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 will mean that more households can receive free energy efficiency upgrades, making their homes warmer, healthier and cheaper to run, in line with the Programme for Government.

In 2020, the average value of the energy efficiency measures provided to households under the Better Energy Warmer Homes scheme was €14,819. A further breakdown of the average costs under the scheme is set out in the table below.

Questions - Written Answers

Category	Description of works	Excluding VAT	Including VAT
Shallow	Includes attic and/or cavity wall insulation and windows occasionally	€4,225	€4,795
Deep	Includes external wall insulation (and any other insulation), and windows occasionally but no heating upgrades	€16,135	€18,313
Deep Heat	Includes heating upgrades and any insulation (including external wall insulation), and windows occasionally	€24,431	€24,729
Weighted		€13,057	€14,819

A range of home energy improvements can be funded under this scheme. The upgrades that are recommended for any given property depend on many factors including age, size, type and condition of the property. For each eligible home, SEAI's managing agent carries out a survey of the home which determines the upgrades that can be installed and funded. The home is subsequently allocated to a contractor which carries out a further assessment of the property to confirm the initial recommendation. A programme of work is then agreed between the contractor and SEAI. Decisions in relation to the recommended upgrades made by both SEAI's managing agent and contractors are informed by a technical operations manual.

The broad conditions for recommending works are set out in the table below.

Energy upgrade	Conditions for recommendation
Attic insulation	· Pitched roofs · Where appropriate ventilation is possible
Cavity wall insulation	· Walls consisting of an inner and an outer leaf separated by a cavity · Wall by wall basis · Where appropriate ventilation is possible
External wall insulation	· Solid or hollow block walls · Properties built after 1940 · Wall by wall basis · Where appropriate ventilation is possible
Internal wall insulation	· Solid or hollow block walls where external wall insulation not suitable · Properties built after 1940 · Wall by wall basis · Where appropriate ventilation is possible
Replacement windows	· Single glazed windows · Window by window basis · Where walls are also being insulated · Replacement doors are not included
Heating upgrade	· Where no central heating or highly inefficient heating is present · Where walls and/or attic are insulated or can be insulated
Heating controls	· As part of a heating upgrade
Ventilation	· Where walls or attic are being insulated · In adherence with current building regulations
Draught proofing	· Secondary measure, eg where wall and/or attic also being insulated · As required
Lagging jacket	· Secondary measure, eg where wall and/or attic also being insulated · As required
CFLs	· Secondary measure, eg where wall and/or attic also being insulated · As required

### Better Energy Communities Programme

165. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the estimated total scheme spend in relation to the better energy communities scheme for 2020; the energy poverty spend; the domestic spend; the number of homes completed; and the number of energy poverty homes completed. [12757/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Communities Energy Grant Scheme (formerly known as the Better Energy Communities Scheme) funded by my Department and operated by the SEAI, makes grant funding available for community-based partnerships to improve the energy efficiency of the building stock in their area. The scheme is applicable to homes, community facilities, and businesses. The data requested relating to 2020 for this scheme is set out in the table below.

	CEG (BEC) 2020
Estimated total scheme spend in 2020	€18.7m*
Energy poverty spend	€4.876m

	CEG (BEC) 2020
Domestic (homes) Spend	€8.631m
Total Number of Homes Completed (including energy poor homes)	656
Energy Poor Homes Completed	342

\*Total scheme spend in 2020 including monitoring & verification spend.

### Climate Action Plan

166. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the discussions he has had with member states or the European Commission with regard to an EU trading system for agricultural emissions as indicated in the 2019 Climate Action Plan; if the outcome of such discussions will feature in the 2021 Climate Action Plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12768/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Climate Action Plan 2019 commits to work with other Member States and the European Commission to consider the creation of an alternative regulatory regime (such as an ETS-type system) for agricultural emissions. The aim of such a system would be to help address the challenge of meeting increasing food demand internationally, while at the same time, contributing to climate commitments, including avoiding the off-shoring of agricultural activity to less carbon-efficient production systems. Such an initiative will require close collaboration and buy-in from other Member States and the European Commission.

Ireland has significantly increased its climate ambition, with the implementation of the Climate Action Plan 2019 and the step change in climate objectives set out in the Programme for Government, including an average of 7% reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions per annum from 2021 to 2030. This increase in ambition will need to be reflected appropriately in the next iteration of the Climate Action Plan.

The Environmental Protection Agency's recent publication "Ireland's Environment: An Integrated Assessment 2020", demonstrates that the overall quality of Ireland's environment is on a downward trend, and the outlook is not optimistic, unless we accelerate the implementation of solutions across all sectors and society. In drafting the Climate Action Plan 2021, far reaching policy changes will be developed across every sector, including agriculture, that set us on the path of systemic change that is required for Ireland to become a climate-neutral and climate-resilient society and economy by 2050 at the latest.

With the 2030 Climate Target Plan and EU Climate Law, the EU will raise its ambition on reducing greenhouse gas emissions to at least 55% below 1990 levels by 2030. This is a substantial increase compared to the existing 40% emissions reduction target. The Commission is preparing to present, by June 2021, an overhaul of all relevant climate legislation as part of a "Fit for 55 Package" to align with the newly proposed target. As part preparing this legislation, the Commission will consider the interactions of how emissions are accounted for between the agriculture and land use sectors.

### Waste Management

167. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to introduce a subvention for waste collection charges for families with

medical conditions that lead to a large amount of general waste produced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12773/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I refer to the reply to Question [8998/21] of 17 February 2021. The position is unchanged.

### **Renewable Energy Generation**

168. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress of the renewable electricity support scheme involving 82 solar and wind projects, seven of which are community based; the level of support provided and envisaged for 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1371/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The results of the first RESS auction were approved by Government in September 2020, with 82 successful projects made up of 479MW of onshore wind energy projects and 796MW of solar energy projects.

The Department issued notices of award for these 82 projects in September 2020. Subsequently 14 projects have withdrawn from RESS-1 consisting of 13 solar projects and one wind project with a total capacity of 187MW (approximately 14% of the auction capacity). The remaining 68 projects, representing 86% of the auction capacity, have entered into implementation agreements and provided performance bonds where appropriate in accordance with the Terms and Conditions. Letters of Offer have been awarded to these projects, which equate to approximately 1,088MW of new renewable generation. This includes seven community projects comprising of five solar and two wind projects.

A number of milestones remain for each project to pass for them to be eligible for support under RESS-1. EirGrid and ESB Networks will be responsible for engagement with applicants to programme the connection to the grid and commissioning of each project.

RESS-1 projects will be supported through the Public Service Obligation (PSO) Levy and projects will be eligible for PSO support upon commercial operation of a RESS-1 project or on 1 July 2021 (whichever is later). The RESS prices achieved in the first competition, with an average bid price of €74.08, represents a significant saving on the previous Renewable Electricity Feed in Tariff schemes. The levels of support provided in 2021 will depend on the volume of projects scheduled to be to connected to the grid in the 2021/22 PSO levy year as well as projected wholesale market prices.

The Department is closely monitoring the development of all RESS 1 projects and the overall programme for delivery of RESS-1.

### **Energy Resources**

169. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the review by his Department of the security of supply of Ireland's natural gas and electricity networks; if he is satisfied that the adequacy of supply is sufficient to meet current needs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1372/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department is carrying out a review of the security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and natural gas systems which is focusing on the period to 2030 in the context of ensuring a

sustainable pathway to 2050. This review will include a detailed technical analysis and a public consultation.

A request for tender for the provision of consultancy services to undertake the technical analysis was published in late 2020. The public procurement procedure for the engagement of consultants is ongoing. Following the completion of the technical analysis, the public consultation will commence. I expect that the overall review will be completed by the end of 2021.

In the short-term, the adequacy of supply of electricity and natural gas is set out by EirGrid (for electricity) and Gas Networks Ireland (for natural gas) in their Winter Outlook publications.

A key issue, in the short-term, is the capacity margin in the electricity market. This is the level of excess generation and interconnection available to meet the peak electricity demand. This has reduced in recent years mainly due to increasing demand along with some power stations exiting the market and others not being available to generate when needed. Covid-19 has also impacted the maintenance of power stations reducing availability at key times.

EirGrid's Winter Outlook highlights the risk of System Alerts which are periods when there is an elevated risk of not being able to meet system demand and/or risk of operational security limits being violated. There have been four System Alerts since August 2020 - most recently on Wednesday 6 January.

The Commission for Regulation of Utilities and EirGrid are taking a range of actions to ensure adequate generation capacity is available to meet demand. These actions include capacity market auctions which incentivise the development of new generation capacity.

My Department continues to work with the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, EirGrid and Gas Networks Ireland to ensure secure supplies of electricity and natural gas to meet Ireland's needs.

## **Climate Change Policy**

170. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the role he or his officials or bodies under the aegis of his Department played in the development of the recently published Ag Climatise roadmap; the engagement he has had with the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine with regard to the development of this roadmap; if he is satisfied that this roadmap is in line with the commitments of the Paris Agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1596/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The AgClimatise Strategy is intended to deliver upon the ambition set out in the Climate Action Plan 2019, which is designed to meet Ireland's existing EU climate targets. My Department, including relevant Agencies under its aegis, was included in the engagement exercise conducted by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine during the development of the AgClimatise Roadmap.

Following the guidance of the European Council given on 10-11 December 2020, an agreement was reached on a general approach on the proposal for a European Climate Law at the Environment Council on 17 December 2020. This includes agreement to update the existing EU greenhouse gas emissions reduction target to at least 55% by 2030 compared to 1990. This new target is a significant increase in ambition from the current EU 2030 target of a 40% reduction. The EU subsequently submitted to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), which is an essential part

of the obligations to be fulfilled under the Paris Agreement.

This development at EU level, along with the step change in climate ambition set out in the Programme for Government, will need to be reflected appropriately in the next iteration of the Climate Action Plan. Far reaching policy changes will be developed across every sector, including agriculture, to reach this high level of ambition.

### **Air Pollution**

171. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when the initial report and recommendations of the urban transport-related air pollution group jointly chaired by his Department and the Department of Transport will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1600/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Urban Transport Related Air Pollution (UTRAP) group was established to:

- examine transport-related air pollution;
- raise stakeholder awareness of this pollution, its occurrence in urban contexts and its legislative framework;
- review and identify best-practice measures to reduce transport-related air pollution in Irish cities and towns; and
- develop an evidence-based national policy framework within which Local Authorities could address urban transport related emissions.

The group includes representatives from Government Departments; environmental, health and transport Agencies; Local Authorities; and additional key stakeholders who have been working together since December 2019.

An initial report on the work of the group has being finalised and I intend to publish it once I have considered its findings and recommendations.

### **Renewable Energy Generation**

172. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to reduce dependence on fossil fuel usage and to increase usage of renewable energy sources for heating and operating buildings given that this accounts for over one quarter of Ireland's energy usage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1575/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Over the last decade, Government has progressively strengthened the Building Regulations relating to the conservation of fuel and energy in new dwellings. The regulations now require new buildings to be at "NZEB" performance levels which is the equivalent of an A2 Building Energy Rating for a typical dwelling. This also encourages the use of renewable technologies and the movement away from traditional fossil fuels. For existing buildings, Government has put a number of supports in place across the residential, commercial and public sectors. These supports incentivise projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions by improving energy efficiency and increasing the use of renewable energy.

The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set ambitious targets to retrofit 500,000 older homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2/cost optimal and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings over the next 10 years. The development of a new retrofit plan to achieve these targets is well underway. Budget 2021 provided €221.5 million in capital funding for SEAI residential and community retrofit programmes. This represents an 82% increase on the 2020 allocation and is the largest amount ever for the schemes. This allocation will kick-start the first phase of our retrofit plan. It is intended to align the delivery of the Phase 2 of the Retrofit Plan with the review of the National Development Plan later this year.

Supports to enable businesses to become more energy efficient are also available from the SEAI. €17.3 million has been allocated for Business Energy Efficiency (Excellence in Energy Efficient Design, SME & Energy Auditing) and Business Renewable Energy (Support Scheme Renewable Heat) for 2021. Information on a range of other supports that enable businesses to become more energy efficient including the SEAI's Energy Academy; information and advisory services; the Large Industry Energy Network; and Accelerated Capital Allowances is available at [www.seai.ie](http://www.seai.ie).

The Public Sector Retrofit Pathfinder Programme provides capital support to retrofit public buildings with the objective of developing a scalable retrofit model that can be replicated across the wider public sector including schools. The budget for this scheme has more than doubled to €21 million for 2021. This increase will provide continued supports to the public sector in delivering on its more ambitious 2030 targets outlined in the Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan.

The Department, together with the SEAI, is also currently carrying out an updated Comprehensive Assessment of the potential for efficient heating and cooling in Ireland. In addition, a policy framework to encourage the development of district heating in Ireland is being finalised with a view to completing this work in early 2021.

## Climate Change Policy

173. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his views on the volume of feedback received to date by his Department regarding the reviews of the implementation of two international conventions relating to the environment, namely the Aarhus Convention and the United Nation's Economic Commission for Europe Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1576/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Seventeen submissions were received in response to the joint public consultation on the 2021 National Implementation Reports for the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) Convention on Access to Information, Public Participation in Decision-Making and Access to Justice in Environmental Matters (the 'Aarhus Convention') and the Protocol on Pollutant Release and Transfer Registers (PRTR). While this is a decrease in the number of submissions received in 2016 during the preparation of the 2017 National Implementation Reports when 26 submissions were received, the depth and quality of the submissions is notable.

*Question No. 174 withdrawn.*

## Renewable Energy Generation

175. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress towards achieving development of the various forms of renewable energy with a view to achieving carbon neutral status within the time limits set out by way of international agreement; if he will accelerate progress in this area while at the same time ensuring the protection of the economic base; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1500/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The increased deployment of renewable energy, in combination with measures to improve energy efficiency, is one of the primary mechanisms to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Under Directive 2009/28/EC ('the Renewable Energy Directive') Ireland committed to meeting a target of 16% of the overall share of energy from renewable sources in gross final consumption of energy by 2020. In 2019, Ireland achieved a 12% overall share of energy from renewable sources broken down as follows

- a 8.9% share of renewable energy in transport;
- a 6.3% share of renewable energy in the heating and cooling sector;
- a 36.5% share of renewable energy in electricity production.

For 2020, a shortfall of between 3% and 4% in respect of the overall renewable energy target is projected. Accordingly, to ensure that we meet our 16% target and secure compliance with the Renewable Energy Directive, my Department negotiated international agreements with Estonia and Denmark to purchase statistical transfers in respect of 3.5 TWh of renewable energy, as provided for under Article 6 of the Directive. The purchases were completed at the end of last year.

The Government is committed to accelerating the deployment of renewable energy to meet the ambitious Programme for Government target of reducing Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions by 51% by 2030, to meet the long-term target of climate neutrality by 2050 contained in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2020, and to contribute to the EU-wide binding target, under the Directive (EU) 2018/2001 ('the recast Renewable Energy Directive'), of 32% of energy from renewable sources by 2030.

To achieve these goals, Ireland has adopted a target of 70% of renewable energy in electricity production by 2030, to be delivered through the deployment of additional onshore and offshore renewable capacity, including 5GW of offshore wind, which will be supported through the Renewable Energy Support Scheme (RESS), and through the increased deployment of microgeneration to be supported by a forthcoming microgeneration support scheme.

The increased deployment of renewable energy will assist in decarbonising the transport sector, through increased use of biofuels provided for through the Biofuel Obligation Schemes and further electrification of the sector through the deployment of electric vehicles and associated infrastructure. In addition to energy efficiency measures, the decarbonisation of the heating and cooling sector will be achieved through renewable energy measures such as the Support Scheme for Renewable Heat and further electrification of the sector by the installation of 400,000 heat pumps in existing homes by 2030.

The development of renewable energy sources will contribute to sustained and sustainable economic growth by supporting economic activity and new jobs, reducing our reliance on imported fossil fuels, and mitigating the long-term damage that rising greenhouse gases will cause to the national, European and global economy.

**Air Pollution**

176. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of inspections that have been carried out in 2019 and 2020 regarding compliance with the Air Pollution Act 1987; the number of samples that have been taken during this period; the percentage of samples that breached the regulations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12866/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Enforcement actions under the Air Pollution Act are a matter for Local Authorities and my Department does not compile statistics in relation to inspections undertaken or enforcement actions initiated. The latest Recommended Criteria for Environmental Inspection data collated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) with respect to 2019 includes the following air enforcement statistics for Local Authorities:

Air Quality Inspections	Total in 2019
Inspections of Air Emission Licenced Sites	89
Total number of inspections carried out under the solid fuel regulations	1,033
Number of multi-agency inspections carried out.	20
Total number of fuel samples collected and analysed.	106

Further details with respect to how effectively local authorities are enforcing the provisions of environmental legislation, including the Air Pollution Act, are available from the series of Local Authority Environmental Performance Assessment reports compiled by the EPA. These reports can be accessed at: <https://www.epa.ie/enforcement/pa/performanceframework/> . The latest report, with respect to 2019, will be published by the EPA in the coming days.

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

**Environmental Policy**

177. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if analysis has been carried out his Department into the impact of artificial light on Ireland's natural environment and the ecosystems within it; if so, if there are plans for light pollution free areas in cities around Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12899/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** There is currently no legislation in Ireland dealing specifically with environmental light pollution, and my Department has no role in this regard.

I am advised that the amount of light that might emanate from a proposed development in terms of potential impacts on adjoining properties and protecting their residential amenity is considered in assessing individual planning applications on a case by case basis. However there is no specific national strategy in place in relation to 'light pollution' under planning or environmental legislation.

## **Climate Change Advisory Council**

178. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the Climate Change Advisory Council; the areas of expertise which will be covered through the appointment of additional members; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12900/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Section 8 of the Climate and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 established the Climate Change Advisory Council. The Council, which is independent in the performance of its functions, provides advice to Government in respect of climate matters. In view of the statutory five-year term of the current Council expiring; the need to facilitate the smooth functioning of the Council, including its intended mandate to propose carbon budgets under the Bill; and the need to ensure relevant deadlines relating to the development of carbon budgets as set out in the Bill are met, I have recently made the following initial appointments as members of the new Climate Change Advisory Council:

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

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

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

## **Departmental Internships**

179. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under his aegis in 2019; the cost in terms of wages and allowances; and the estimated numerical capacity of State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis. [12953/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The information requested in relation to the bodies under the aegis of my Department is an operational matter for each body. The Department will request the relevant bodies to reply directly to the Deputy with the information requested in respect of their organisations.

## **Energy Efficiency**

180. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress to date on the national retrofitting programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1580/21]

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

The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set ambitious targets to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2/cost optimal and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings over the next 10 years. The development of the national retrofit programme to achieve these targets is well underway. Some €221.5 million in capital funding has been provided this year for SEAI residential and community retrofit programmes. This represents an 82% increase on the 2020 allocation and is the largest amount ever for the schemes. This allocation has facilitated the expansion and improvement of existing SEAI grant schemes and the introduction of new initiatives. The funding has already supported calls for projects under the new National Retrofit (One-Stop-Shop Development) scheme and the Community Energy Grant Scheme as well as a €47 million increase in funding for energy poverty schemes. Further SEAI administered retrofit initiatives will be launched in the coming months.

A further allocation of €65 million has been provided to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to support the retrofitting of local authority homes.

It is essential that appropriate structures and governance arrangements are put in place to help us meet our retrofit targets. For that reason, another key development was the designation of the SEAI as the National Retrofit Delivery Office. Significant additional resources have been provided to SEAI to increase the capacity of the organisation to drive delivery of our retrofit targets.

*Question No. 181 withdrawn.*

*Question No. 182 answered with Question No. 120.*

### **Energy Production**

183. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to develop geothermal energy in Ireland given its potential to provide a significant proportion of the country's heating; if there are areas of the country more suited to this type of energy source; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1416/21]

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

Geothermal is a secure, environmentally sustainable and cost-effective source of renewable energy. In particular, geothermal energy can help decarbonise our heating sector, which accounts for roughly a third of Ireland's energy consumption. Research has shown that resources suitable for district heating and other applications are most likely to be found in the East, Midlands and Southwest of Ireland. In addition, new modelling may indicate that Wicklow, Wexford, Waterford and Cork have potential for deep untapped reservoirs of geothermal heat.

Its current usage in Ireland is mainly confined to shallow geothermal for small-scale projects such as domestic heating. The Government has supported the drive to increase the use of geothermal energy in Ireland through research and mapping by the SEAI and Geological Survey Ireland.

Further realisation of deeper geothermal resources requires our continued support and the Government is actively developing a policy and regulatory framework for the sector. On 18 November 2020 my Department published two papers, available at gov.ie

- An Assessment of Geothermal Energy for District Heating in Ireland; and

- Geothermal Energy in Ireland, A roadmap for a policy and regulatory framework.

The next steps include:

- further research and acquisition of additional data to improve our understanding of geothermal potential led by Geological Survey Ireland;
  - the development of a draft policy statement on geothermal energy to be published for consultation;
  - a final policy for Government consideration;
- and, if approved;
- preparation of supporting legislation setting out the new regulatory framework .

I encourage people and organisations who are interested in helping shape the future of geothermal energy in Ireland to examine the above documents and to make contact with my Department; contact details are available on gov.ie.

### **Renewable Energy Generation**

184. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the process for the setting up and distribution of community dividend and benefit funds associated with wind and solar energy projects; if there is a public record available of the community dividend and benefit funds allocated to date for such developments in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13133/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS) is the main government support vehicle to deliver on Ireland's 70% renewable electricity target by 2030 and it includes provisions for community participation and benefit. All projects successful in a RESS auction must establish a Community Benefit Fund. The contribution for each project has been set at €2 per megawatt-hour. These funds will be aligned to incentivise investment in local renewable energy, energy efficiency measures and climate action initiatives, as well as other worthy local causes.

My Department has already committed to the publication of a National Register and a RESS Community Benefit Fund Good Practice Principles Handbook by July 2021. The latter will lay out guidance on how the new funds will be managed and administered and the need to ensure community participation in fund decision-making via the establishment of a local committee. My Department and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) are developing a draft of this guidance which will be made available for public consultation shortly. The Register will track all projects and payments over the lifetime of the RESS and will be publicly available.

Information in relation to existing community benefit funds is not available in my Department. I understand, however, that Wind Energy Ireland publishes details of existing community benefit funds annually.

### **Legislative Measures**

185. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the geothermal energy development Bill; when it is likely to be ad-

vanced further; the reason for the delay in advancing the Bill; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13137/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I am keen to ensure that a modern, robust policy and regulatory framework is in place to support the increased use of geothermal energy in Ireland. In this regard, I recently announced plans for developing such a framework for the sector. On 18 November 2020 my Department published two papers, available at *gov.ie*.

- An Assessment of Geothermal Energy for District Heating in Ireland; and
- Geothermal Energy in Ireland, A roadmap for a policy and regulatory framework.

The next steps in progressing the policy and regulatory framework being undertaken by my Department include:

- further research and acquisition of additional data to improve our understanding of geothermal potential led by Geological Survey Ireland;
- the development of a draft policy statement on geothermal energy to be published for consultation;
- a final policy for Government consideration;

and, if approved;

- preparation of supporting legislation setting out the new regulatory framework.

I encourage people and organisations who are interested in helping shape the future of geothermal energy in Ireland to examine the above documents and to make contact with my Department; contact details are available on *gov.ie*

### **Broadband Infrastructure**

186. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the roll-out of fibre broadband at a location (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13168/21]

**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 under way.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland that, as of 3 March 2021, nearly 187,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Surveys are complete or underway in County Cavan in the areas of Ballinagh, Corlurgan, Araghan, Poles, Caughoo, Belturbet, Killashandra, Butler's Bridge, Ballylennon, Redhills, Gannons Cross, Derryheelan, Castlesaunders, Townparks, Foalies Bridge, Riverrun and Erne Hill. Main build works commenced outside Cavan town including Ballinagh, Corlurgan, Araghan, Poles and Caughoo (in the south of the

county). Further details are available on specific areas within County Cavan 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](http://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](mailto: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 3 March, 287 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 Gallonray House Gallonreagh Maudabawn, Kildallan Parish Hall, Killenkere Leisure Centre, Castle Saunderson Scout Centre, Bunnoe Community Centre (5.9 Kilometres from the premises), Drumavaddy Community Centre, Templeport Community Centre, Cornafean Community Centre, Mullahoran Community Centre and Glengevlin Community Hall. The site at Castlerahan Community Centre is installed and connected. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

Laragh National School is planned 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/>.

### **Broadband Infrastructure**

187. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps he will undertake to ensure the provision of high-speed broadband connection to a household (details supplied) in County Dublin; when a high-speed connection will be available to the residents; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13192/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The High Speed Broadband Map, which is available at [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://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 the area referred to and further information in this regard is available at [www.comreg.ie/compare/#/services](http://www.comreg.ie/compare/#/services).

Premises in the area referenced in the Question are served directly from the local eir exchange. Our records indicate that eir is currently providing a minimum speed of 30Mbps to the premises referred to in the Question and to all the premises within the housing estate.

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](mailto:broadband@decc.gov.ie) with full details and the matter will be investigated by my officials.

### **Broadband Infrastructure**

188. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which the broadband roll-out throughout the country can be expedited with a view to ensure the availability of sufficient connectivity to enable the maximum number of citizens to work from home or from hubs where available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13220/21]

190. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of new broadband connections being made on a monthly basis notwithstanding the lockdown; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13222/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 188 and 190 together.

A combination of commercial investment and the State led intervention under the National Broadband Plan (NBP) will ensure access to high speed broadband in every part of the country and no premises will be left behind, no matter how remote. Of the 2.4 million premises across Ireland, 77% of premises now have access to high-speed broadband of more than 30 Mbps. National Broadband Ireland (NBI) will address the remaining premises through the NBP State led intervention.

The NBP State led Intervention will be delivered by NBI under a contract to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the over 544,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools. The deployment plan forecasts construction commenced in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years.

In addition, a number of commercial operators have announced further investment plans in high-speed broadband. Eir has said it will roll out fibre to a further 1.4 million premises, bringing their fibre deployment to some 1.8 million premises. SIRO is currently completing the first phase of its fibre deployment which will see 375,000 premises passed with gigabit services. Virgin Media is offering 250Mbps as a standard offering with 500Mbps and 1Gbps available to many of their customers across the more than 1 million premises that they cover. Many other network operators and telecom service providers across the State also continue to invest in their networks.

The latest available Comreg Key Data Report on broadband for Q3, 2020 shows that fixed broadband subscriptions increased to 1.5 million which is an increase of 0.8% for that quarter and an increase of 3.6% compared to Q3, 2019. Of these, over 223k were fibre to the prem-

ises (FTTP) subscriptions representing 14.8% of the total fixed broadband in Q3 2020 which is up from 9.9% in Q3 2019. In Q3, 2020 approximately 80.4% of broadband subscribers had purchased broadband with speeds equal to or greater than 30Mbps. Of all fixed broadband subscriptions 40.8% of subscribers purchased broadband speeds equal to or greater than 100Mbps. According to Eurostat, in 2019 Ireland's household penetration rate (including fixed and mobile broadband) at 90% is slightly higher than the EU average of 89%.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland that, as of 3 March 2021, nearly 187,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Further details are available on specific areas 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](http://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](mailto: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 3 March, 287 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.

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/>.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of good reliable broadband to ensure that citizens across Ireland can avail of remote working, education and other essential online facilities. The Programme for Government commits to seek to accelerate the roll out of the National Broadband Plan. In this regard, my Department continues to engage with NBI to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of this roll-out to establish the possibility of bringing forward premises which are currently scheduled in years 6 and 7 of the deployment. Exploring the potential to accelerate the network roll-out is being undertaken in parallel with the measures required to mitigate delays arising as a result of Covid-19 which are also the subject of detailed discussions with NBI.

### **Broadband Infrastructure**

189. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the efforts being made to ensure the provision of reliable high-speed broadband to industrial hubs throughout the country in order to address communication deficiencies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13221/21]

**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

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over 544,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools. The deployment plan forecasts construction commenced in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high-speed broadband within the next four years. 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 and currently include primary schools, community centres, sports centres, agricultural marts, industrial estates and post offices. To date most of that activity has focussed on community halls, sports centres and schools.

My Department has now prioritised primary schools with no high speed broadband and continues to work with the Department of Education in this regard. An acceleration of this aspect of the National Broadband Plan will see some 679 primary schools connected to high speed broadband by 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframe of 2026.

While schools are now clearly the main focus of this element of the NBP, other locations of a strategic nature in the intervention area continue to be assessed for the purposes of this element of the NBP.

BCPs are a subset of a much wider national network of hubs. In this regard the Department of Rural & Community Development are chairing an inter-departmental working group which is seeking to enhance and promote the visibility of this national network and, as part of this exercise, are exploring the range of services that these facilities will offer.

*Question No. 190 answered with Question No. 188.*

### **Air Quality**

191. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which air quality is being protected; the degree to which the measures in place are achieving the desired result; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13223/21]

192. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which the monitoring of air quality has shown the need for additional measures in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13224/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 191 and 192 together.

The Environmental Protection Agency is responsible for monitoring ambient air quality and national emissions levels in Ireland. The most recent report on Ireland's air quality can be found at <https://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/air/quality/epairqualityreport2019.html>, and the most recent report on our annual emissions is available at <http://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/air/airemissions/airpollutantemissions/iir2020/> .

These reports serve to inform the policies and measures that are required to improve our air quality and which are detailed in Ireland's National Air Pollution Control Programme (NAP-CP). The updated NAPCP can be accessed at: <https://assets.gov.ie/124969/bff8ac05-f314-4f91-9755-907c8da3ef27.pdf>

Enforcement actions under the Air Pollution Act are a matter for Local Authorities who have a range of powers available to them to assist them in protecting the quality of our air. These include the authority to undertake inspections of premises and vehicles, to bring prosecutions,

and issue fixed payment notices as required.

The Programme for Government contains a commitment to develop a regional approach to air quality enforcement. The intention is to establish dedicated resources within regional lead authorities to provide co-ordination, expertise and advice to support effective and consistent implementation of air legislation across the country. A coordinated approach is required given the links between burning of solid fuels and the health effects of air pollution, as well as the potential for market distortion for businesses properly adhering to the regulations. Increased multi-agency inspections and enforcement, including the increased use of fixed payment notices, are required and my Department is fully committed to supporting Local Authorities in this regard.

### **Climate Change Policy**

193. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which the international community continues to ameliorate or exacerbate climate change trends; the measures taken or proposed to address this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13225/21]

194. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the international community accepts the need to contribute to the fight against climate change in a meaningful way; the steps or actions that would need to be taken to achieve same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13226/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**  
I propose to take Questions Nos. 193 and 194 together.

Climate change remains a trans-boundary challenge that can only be addressed through committed ambition and effective multilateral cooperation at the international level. The consequences of failure are catastrophic, particularly for some of the world's most vulnerable people. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) will hold its 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow, United Kingdom, from 1 to 12 November 2021. While the Paris Agreement is delivering on raising global climate ambition, further effort is required. A positive outcome at COP26 is critical to secure increased effort to avoid and prevent irreversible climate change.

Ireland is committed to concerted global effort to address the climate challenge and engages in negotiations under UNFCCC through its membership of the European Union (EU). The EU continues to retain its leadership role on climate ambition and mobilising and supporting action of other Parties.

The EU aims to be climate-neutral by 2050. This objective is at the heart of the European Green Deal and in line with the EU's commitment to global climate action under the Paris Agreement. The European Council has agreed, at its meeting in December 2020, to increase the EU's 2030 target to reduce emissions by at least 55% relative to 1990 levels. Legislative proposals to implement the new EU 2030 target will be presented by June 2021, and additional effort will be asked of all Member States, including Ireland. Ireland fully supports the enhanced ambition at EU level to increase the EU 2030 target to at least 55% emissions reduction.

### **Climate Action Plan**

195. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress to date in achieving targets as set out in the Climate Action Plan 2019 with particular reference to the decarbonisation of the energy sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13227/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** 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 a 30% reduction in emissions by 2030 compared to 2005 levels. The policies and measures in Climate Action Plan 2019 are designed to ensure that Ireland meets this target. Within the Climate Action Plan there are specific targets for the energy sector to meet. The Climate Action Plan set ambitious targets to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2/cost optimal and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings over the next 10 years. The development of the National Retrofit Programme to achieve these targets is well underway. €221.5 million in capital funding has been provided this year for SEAI residential and community retrofit programmes. This represents an 82% increase on the 2020 allocation and is the largest amount ever for the schemes. This allocation has facilitated the expansion and improvement of existing SEAI grant schemes and the introduction of new initiatives. The funding has already supported calls for projects under the new National Retrofit (One-Stop-Shop Development) Scheme and the Community Energy Grant Scheme, as well as a €47 million increase in funding for energy poverty schemes. Further SEAI administered retrofit initiatives will be launched in the coming months. The Climate Action Plan also sets a target for 70% renewable electricity by 2030. The Sustainable Energy Authority Ireland (SEAI) published their Energy in Ireland report in December 2020, which is available at [www.seai.ie](http://www.seai.ie). The report shows that the share of electricity generated by renewables was 37.6% in 2019, up from 33.0% in 2018. Wind was the largest share of renewable electricity at 32% with hydro at 2.8% and other renewables including biomass at 2.7%. The European Green Deal commits to delivering net zero greenhouse gas emissions at EU level by 2050 and increasing the EU-wide emissions reduction target from 40% to up to at least 55% by 2030, to align with the goal of the Paris Agreement limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius. Ireland fully supports the enhanced ambition at EU level. This ambition aligns with our Programme for Government commitment to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030 (a 51% reduction over the decade) and to achieving net zero emissions by 2050. Work is currently underway across Government through the development of a new Climate Action Plan for 2021. This plan will include additional policies and measures in every sector to bring about the significant changes needed to transform our society. Furthermore, the Government is undertaking a review of the National Development Plan (NDP), which will look at the necessary capital investment in areas such as energy, transport and the built environment to support delivery of the Programme for Government commitment.

### Climate Change Policy

196. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which progress is being made towards the reduction of emissions in line with EU and international targets without negative impact on the agrifood sector; if it is possible at this stage to identify enhanced progress in the area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13228/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The 2009 EU Effort Sharing Decision 406/2009/EC established annual greenhouse gas emis-

sion targets for the period 2013-2020 for Ireland. For the year 2020 itself, the target set for Ireland is that emissions should be 20% below 2005 levels. The latest EPA projections show that emissions from those sectors of the economy covered by our targets could be between 2-4% below 2005 levels. While these projections do not take into account the likely impact of Covid-19, they demonstrate the challenge we face to reduce emissions. The EU itself has also an overall target of 20% emissions reduction by 2020 and has reported that it is well on track to meet this and is likely to exceed the target. The EU Effort Sharing Regulation EU/2018/842 (ESR) established binding annual greenhouse gas emission targets for Member States for the period 2021–2030. The ESR sets Ireland a target of a 30% reduction in emissions by 2030 compared to 2005 levels. The policies and measures in Climate Action Plan 2019 are designed to ensure that Ireland meets this target. Ireland's target is expected to increase in line with ambition under the EU Green Deal to reduce emissions by at least 55% by 2030 versus 1990 levels.

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. It also recognises the special economic and social role of agriculture and the distinct characteristics of biogenic methane, as described by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in terms of plans and strategies to achieve these targets.

While emissions from the agrifood sector have continued to increase, Irish agriculture has a positive international reputation in terms of producing high quality, sustainable produce. The long-term challenge for the sector is to meet the national policy objective of an approach to carbon neutrality which does not compromise our capacity for sustainable food production. The Government is committed to finding the balance between environmental, climate and biodiversity needs and supports for farmers.

The existing Climate Action Plan includes measures for the Department for Agriculture, Food and the Marine to deliver in order to ensure we meet our existing targets. This is underpinned by actions aimed at: reducing emissions on our farms by vigorously adopting the abatement opportunities identified by Teagasc; promoting diversification of land use as part of a gradual transition; harnessing opportunities in the bioeconomy; realising the potential of sustainable bioenergy supply opportunities; better management of our peatlands and soils; and developing clusters of exemplar practice.

The 2021 Climate Action Plan will further evolve the role agriculture and in particular the agrifood industry play in supporting our climate ambitions, and responsibilities. We are working to identify actions to support increased carbon removals. Land-use offers significant potential to sequester additional carbon and provides a new source of family farm income and rural economic benefit. As well as developing the next Climate Action Plan, we are evaluating the potential climate contributions from land use improvements, to set in train the development of a land land-use strategy.

And finally, we recognise the interlinked role the agriculture and agrifood sectors have with the waste sector and are committed to supporting the agrifood sector to evolve Ireland's capability as a leader in circular economies. We are investing in research in the agrifood sector to prioritise investment in climate and the bio-economy and will implement the National Policy Statement on the Bio-economy, providing the agrifood sector with new opportunities using biological resources in a sustainable and circular manner.

## **National Broadband Plan**

197. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress to date in the development of a new national digital strategy with particular reference to national connectivity being delivered by the national broadband plan; if specific targets in respect of this strategy have been identified; the progress to date in achieving same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13229/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government commits to developing a new National Digital Strategy which will utilise the increased level of national connectivity that is being delivered by the National Broadband Plan (NBP). Preliminary work, co-ordinated by the Department of the Taoiseach, had been undertaken on a draft strategy in the lifetime of the previous Government and the experience of Covid-19 has only emphasised the importance of digital technologies to people's daily lives.

Enhanced connectivity will be used to drive digital transformation in public services to deliver better outcomes for citizens. The NBP will provide the necessary supporting infrastructure to ensure a nationwide approach by ensuring all premises have high speed broadband access. In advance of the NBP fibre roll-out, Broadband Connection points are being established in remote rural locations to enhance connectivity.

It is anticipated that further work on digitalisation will be undertaken as the plans for economic recovery are developed and lessons are learnt from how Irish society has deployed and relied upon digital technology during the pandemic.

### **Climate Change Policy**

198. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress to date in achieving targets as set out in the waste action plan for a circular economy with particular reference to the reduction of plastic; if targets set in respect of a ban of single use plastics have been met or are on target to be met; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13231/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy outlines the measures Ireland is taking under the Single Use Plastics Directive (EU 2019/904) to substantially reduce the amount of single use plastic items we use and to sustainably manage the waste arising from those we do. The Directive will be transposed by the deadline of 3rd July 2021 and from that date single use plastic cutlery, plates, straws, balloon and cotton bud sticks may not be placed on the Irish market. This ban will also apply to expanded polystyrene cups and food containers and all products containing oxo-degradable plastic. The Plan also contains our commitment to lead EU efforts on dealing with disposable coffee cups through a prohibition on the use of these cups for sit-in purposes, a latte levy and an eventual ban on disposable coffee cups and cold drinks cups and introduce a Deposit and Return Scheme (DRS) for plastic bottles and aluminium cans. I will shortly be publishing the draft regulatory framework for the DRS for public consultation.

### **Broadband Infrastructure**

199. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of broadband connection points installed in County Kildare in the past three years to date; the number of installations planned over the next 12 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13232/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** 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 3 March, 287 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible locations and the Department of Education for schools. Crookstown Further Education and Training and Community Centre along with Bigstone Community Hall have now been connected with high speed publicly accessible broadband, with Lullymore Heritage Park planned over the coming months. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

Rathmore National School and Saint David's National School in Naas have been installed and will be connected by the retail service provider shortly for educational access as part of this initiative. My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise other 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 has been agreed which will see some 679 primary schools connected to high speed broadband by 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframe of 2026. Further details are available on the NBI website at <https://nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/>.

### **Climate Change Policy**

200. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he is satisfied that carbon emissions throughout the EU are measured equally with a view to ensuring that the more developed countries in the EU do not have the advantage over expanding economies such as Ireland to ensure an evenly spread advantage or disadvantage throughout the EU and noting in particular the relatively low rate of heavy carbon emitting industry here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13233/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Article 13.7 of the Paris Agreement, of which both the EU and its Member States are signatories, requires signed parties to provide regular greenhouse gas emissions inventories to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), in order to track both a country's achievement of their nationally determined contributions and climate policies as well as regional climate policies, and the world's progress in limiting global warming. The UNFCCC reporting guidelines on annual inventories for Annex I Parties (which covers EU Member States) require that Annex I Parties should use the IPCC Guidelines for National Greenhouse Gas Inventories to measure emissions inventories. This ensures consistency of measurement across Member States. Emissions from heavy industry in the EU are managed under the EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS). The EU ETS limits emissions from more than 11,000 heavy energy-using power stations, industrial plants and airlines. In Ireland, our ETS sector accounts for 25% of our emissions, with the remaining 75% in the non-ETS sector. This compares to an EU average of 39% ETS and 61% non-ETS. As the target for the EU ETS is set on an EU level, there is a level playing field for participants in the scheme across all EU Member States.

### **Electricity Generation**

201. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the way in which the cost of producing electricity here compares with other

countries throughout Europe with particular reference to maintaining competitiveness throughout industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13235/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government commits to providing the reliable supply of safe, secure and clean energy in order to deliver a phase-out of fossil fuels. This means Ireland must deliver on its commitment to reach 70% renewable electricity by 2030 and that this must be planned and delivered in a cost-effective way that minimises costs to consumers. The SEAI report on Electricity and Gas Prices in Ireland (Jan – June) 2020 sets out the breakdown of electricity prices based on energy & supply, network costs, renewable taxes, capacity taxes, environmental taxes and other costs. Section 4.1.6 on page 40 of the report provides a breakdown of costs to non-households (business). Table 28 shows the breakdown of these costs for all EU member states in terms of cent per kilowatt hour. The report is available online at <https://www.seai.ie/publications/Price-Directive-1st-Semester-2020.pdf>

The SEAI, in its Energy in Ireland 2020 report, available at <https://www.seai.ie/publications/Energy-in-Ireland-2020.pdf>, shows in Table 22, Page 61, that electricity prices to Irish industry rose by 2% in real terms between 2015 and 2019. The fuel mix for electricity generation is one factor that has a key bearing on the variation in the price of electricity. In the EU, Ireland has a high overall dependency for electricity generation on fossil fuels, at 69%.

Since 2015, energy prices in Ireland have increased by 6.7% in real terms, compared with an average increase of 1.6% in OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) Europe, and a 1.4% decrease in the United States over the same period based on data from the International Energy Agency (IEA). In 2019, overall energy prices in Ireland were 4.3% higher than in 2018, compared with an increase of 1.1% in OECD Europe and a 3.9% decrease in the US.

## **Inland Fisheries**

202. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will report on the recent national efforts on assessing and improving quality of inland waters particularly in the context of the health of inland fish stocks. [13295/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Monitoring, assessing and addressing water quality falls within the remit of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the Environmental Protection Agency and local authorities operating under a suite of national and EU legislation. My Department via Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI), contributes to national water quality efforts via the monitoring of the health of fish stocks and reporting to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

While this is a small component of the overall national effort, I consider it an important contribution, as fish health trends are among the most practical barometers of water quality. A formal agreement is in place with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to carry out this work and IFI are committed to maintaining this contribution.

## **Local Authority Housing**

203. **Deputy Louise O’Reilly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if his attention has been drawn to a recently built local authority housing estate

(details provided) with no provision for broadband due to a lack of landline infrastructure; and if he will engage with the relevant authorities to resolve the issue. [13332/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I understand the importance of telecommunication services, particularly at a time where restrictions are in place and when people are relying much more on these electronic communications services. The Estate in question is located in the BLUE area of the NBP High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website at [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://www.broadband.gov.ie). Blue areas are not included in the State intervention area covered by 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.

That being said, my Department will investigate this matter with the relevant authorities and will revert to the Deputy with a further update.

### **Energy Efficiency**

204. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the reason low-income pensioners who own their own homes are precluded from availing of SEAI home energy grants for wall insulation in cases in which they received support previously for attic insulation in view of the fact that wall insulation was not covered by the grant originally; his views on whether this is fair or reasonable for low income pensioners who struggle to afford to heat their homes; the reason a review of the scheme has not yet been published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13475/21]

**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. To date, over 142,000 homes have received free upgrades under the scheme and in 2020 the average value of the energy efficiency measures provided per household was over €14,800. There are currently over 7,800 homes on the scheme work programme. This includes homes that: are currently undergoing works; have been allocated to contractors for works; completed an initial home survey and are awaiting allocation to a contractor or are awaiting an initial survey. The homeowners on the work programme have never received any works previously under the scheme.

SEAI data indicates that for homes completed in 2020, the average time from application to completion was approximately 18 months. This has been impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. The average time for a surveyor to be allocated over this period was approximately 8 months. My Department is in regular contact with the SEAI in relation to the operation of the Scheme. Work in relation to recommendations on the implementation of changes to the scheme including the issue of repeat upgrade visits has been ongoing in recent months and is nearing completion. In addition, funding for the SEAI energy poverty retrofit schemes has increased to over €109 million in 2021 - an increase of €47 million on last year.

Furthermore, delivery capacity has increased due to a new, broader contractor panel that commenced at the end of 2020.

I have also secured additional resources this year to expand the capacity of the SEAI to deliver the scheme.

## Broadband Infrastructure

205. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when fibre broadband will be available to a household (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13498/21]

**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](http://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 3 March 2021, nearly 187,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Surveys are complete in County Donegal in the areas Milford, Letterkenny, Ramelton, Termon, Ballymacool, Kilmacrennan, Mullaghfin and Tommyscroft. Further details are available on specific areas within County Donegal through the NBI website which provides a facility for any premises within the intervention area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website [www.nbi.ie](http://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](mailto: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 3 March, 287 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 BCP's connected in Donegal are Ray Community Centre, Leghowney Community Centre (9.21 Kilometres from the premises), Dunree Military Museum, Cranford Coole Community Centre, the Gweedore Theatre and Meenreagh Hostel. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise schools with no high speed broadband, within the Intervention Area, for connection over the term of the NBP. In this regard, an acceleration of this aspect of the National Broadband Plan was announced in December which will see some 679 primary schools connected to high speed broadband by 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframe of 2026. Some 42 schools in County Donegal are to be connected by the end of 2022. Further details are available on the NBI website at <https://nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/>.

## Departmental Advertising

206. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the amount spent across his Department on advertising with regard to Covid-19 by month and by media outlet (details supplied) from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021. [13567/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department has not incurred any expenditure on advertising in relation to Covid-19 during the period in question. The information requested regarding the agencies under the aegis of my Department is an operational matter for each Agency. I will request the relevant bodies to reply directly to the Deputy with the information requested in respect of their organisation

### Covid-19 Pandemic

207. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if consumers who have flights booked during the period of level 5 restrictions, for example, those with postponed flights from 2020, are entitled to a refund if they cannot travel during level 5 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12518/21]

244. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if he plans to put legislative protections in place for those persons who postponed flights from 2020 into 2021 but still may not be able or want to travel in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12907/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton) :** I propose to take Questions Nos. 207 and 244 together.

Consumer rights for overseas travel are protected under EU law, which of course applies in Ireland. Air passenger rights are protected by Regulation (EC) No. 261/2004, which covers the rights of airlines passengers in instances of flight cancellations. It provides that where a flight is cancelled then the consumer must receive a refund within seven days. The EU Package Travel Directive provides a separate suite of consumer protections for people who make bookings through a licenced travel agent or tour operator. The customers of licenced travel agents and tour operators are entitled to refund within two weeks should they or their holiday provider cancel the booking.

If any individuals are unclear about their rights, the Commission for Aviation Regulation has a dedicated web site for consumers [www.flightright.ie](http://www.flightright.ie).

### Taxi Licences

208. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Transport if he will clarify the situation regarding taxi licences that have vehicle capacity for wheelchairs; if such licences can be sold; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12541/21]

209. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Transport the supports available from his Department to the taxi industry. [12542/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 208 and 209 together.

The Deputy may be aware that the Government has introduced a wide-ranging programme of supports with broad eligibility criteria for individuals and businesses which have been adversely affected by COVID-19. These supports include wage subsidies, rates waivers, restart grants, lending facilities, equity injection, business advisory supports, and the Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

My Department is providing funding to the National Transport Authority to enable it to

waive annual vehicle licence renewal fees for 2021. Furthermore, it 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.

The sale of small public service vehicle licences, as suggested by the Deputy, is prohibited under section 14(1) of the Taxi Regulation Act 2013. There are no plans to adjust this provision at this time, the rationale being that a licence should indicate a person's suitability to carry out a function and should not have, by association, a monetary value or be tradeable on the open market or redeemable for a value.

### **Taxi Regulations**

210. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Transport if he will engage with the Taxi Regulator with regard to the requirement to ensure that vehicles for taxi purposes are under a certain age in view of the impact of Covid-19 on the business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12543/21]

**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 independent regulator, 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.

### **International Bodies**

211. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if he will provide a schedule of the International Maritime Organisation Conventions and Codes (details supplied) that have yet to be ratified in Ireland; and the stage they are at in the ratification process, that is, in part, yet to commence and be fully ratified. [12557/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton) :** An international convention is a multi-nation agreement between states that sets out certain standards to be met by signatory nations and according to Bunreacht na hÉireann, international conventions can only become a part of domestic law if the Oireachtas so determines. Therefore, anytime Ireland is required to ratify an international convention, primary legislation is required. In addition, effect can only be given to an international convention as it stands at the time of the enactment of the Act. As a result, primary legislation is required to update the definitions of the various Conventions as they are amended. In practice this would require my Department to enact primary legislation nearly on an annual basis to keep up with the amendments to international conventions in order to provide for the necessary secondary legislation.

The Law Reform Commission (LRC) is aware of the challenges the Department faces when implementing international obligations into domestic legislation. In 2014 the Commission began work on a project which examines the methodology and models of implementing international obligations and the monitoring of and accountability for state obligations and published a report in September 2020 which is available here <https://publications.lawreform.ie/Portal/>

External/en-GB/RecordView/Index/61653

The majority of international conventions which come under the remit of the Department fall under the International Maritime Organization (IMO). The IMO details ratification by States on its website available here <https://www.imo.org/en/About/Conventions/Pages/StatusOfConventions.aspx>

The table below outlines the status of the conventions relevant to my Department as requested with regard to their ratification. It should be noted that Codes, Guidelines and amendments to Conventions do not require individual ratification and unless an objection is raised they are accepted. However, implementing legislation may be needed to give effect to such Codes, Guidelines and amendments.

Convention/Protocol/Code	In full	In Part	To Commence	Comments
International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution of the Sea by Oil, 1954	X			
International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from Ships, 1973; the 1978 and 1997 Protocols thereto (MARPOL), as amended	X			
International Convention on the Prevention of Marine Pollution by Dumping of Wastes and Other Matter, 1972 and the 1996 Protocol thereto, as amended	X			
Helsinki Convention on the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Baltic Sea Area, 1992				Only relevant to Baltic States
Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposals, 1989 as amended (1)				Does not come under the remit of the Department of Transport
International Convention on the Control of Harmful Anti-fouling Systems on Ships, 2001 (1)	X			
International Convention for the Control and Management of Ships' Ballast Water and Sediments, 2004 (1)			X	Drafting underway on implementing instrument.
Hong Kong International Convention for the Safe and Environmentally Sound Recycling of Ships, 2009 (1)			X	Primary Legislation required.
International Code of Safety for Ships Operating in Polar Waters (Polar Code) (1)				Codes do not require separate ratification. This Code is part of the SOLAS and MARPOL Conventions
International Convention Relating to Intervention on the High Seas in Cases of Oil Pollution Casualties, 1969 (1)	X			
Protocol Relating to Intervention on the High Seas in Cases of Pollution by Substances other than Oil, 1973 as amended	X			
International Convention on Oil Pollution, Preparedness, Response and Co-operation, 1990	X			
Protocol on Preparedness, Response and Co-operation to Pollution Incidents by Hazardous and Noxious Substances, 2000 (OPRC-HNS Protocol)			X	
International Convention on Civil Liability for Oil Pollution Damage, 1969 (CLC)	X			Since denounced
Protocol of 1992 to amend the International Convention on Civil Liability for Oil Pollution Damage of 29 November 1969	X			Since denounced
Consolidated Text of the International Convention on Civil Liability for Oil Pollution Damage, 1969 as amended by the 1992 Protocol thereto (1992 CLC), as amended	X			
International Convention on the Establishment of an International Fund for Compensation for Oil Pollution Damage, 1992 (1992 Fund Convention) as amended	X			
Protocol of 2003 to the International Convention on the Establishment of an International Fund for Compensation for Oil Pollution Damage, 1992 (Supplementary Fund Protocol)	X			
International Convention on Liability and Compensation for Damage in Connection with the Carriage of Hazardous and Noxious Substances by Sea, 2010 (HNS Convention 2010)			X	Primary Legislation required

Convention/Protocol/Code	In full	In Part	To Commence	Comments
Basel Protocol on Liability and Compensation for Damage resulting from Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal, 1999				Does not come under the remit of the Department of Transport
International Convention on Civil Liability for Bunker Oil Pollution Damage, 2001 (Bunkers Convention)	X			
International Maritime Security				
Code of Conduct Concerning the Repression of Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in the Western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden (Djibouti Code of Conduct)				Not relevant to Ireland - ineligible
Revised Code of Conduct Concerning the Repression of Piracy, Armed Robbery Against Ships, and Illicit Maritime Activity in the Western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden Area				Not relevant to Ireland - ineligible
Code of Conduct Concerning the Repression of Piracy, Armed Robbery against Ships, and Illicit Maritime Activity in West and Central Africa, 2013 (Yaoundé Code of Conduct)				Not relevant to Ireland - ineligible
Code of Practice for the Investigation of Crimes of Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships				Not relevant to Ireland - ineligible
Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP)				Not relevant to Ireland - ineligible
International Convention Relating to Stowaways, 1957				Never entered into force internationally
Convention on Facilitation of International Maritime Traffic, 1965, as amended (The FAL Convention)	X			
IMO Resolution FAL.13(42) (adopted on 8 June 2018) Revised Guidelines on the Prevention of Access By Stowaways And The Allocation Of Responsibilities To Seek The Successful Resolution Of Stowaway Cases				Guidelines do not require ratification
United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, 2000				Does not come under the remit of Department of Transport.
Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime				Does not come under the remit of Department of Transport.
Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime				Does not come under the remit of Department of Transport.
United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, 1988				Does not come under the remit of Department of Transport.
Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts and Components and Ammunition, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, 2001				Does not come under the remit of Department of Transport.
Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation, 1988 (SUA Convention)	X			Maritime Security Act 2004
Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts Against the Safety of Fixed Platforms Located on the Continental Shelf, 1988	X			Maritime Security Act 2004
2005 Protocol to the 1988 Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation			X	
2005 Protocol to the 1988 Protocol for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Fixed Platforms Located on the Continental Shelf			X	
International Convention for the Suppression of Terrorist Bombings, 1997				Does not come under the remit of Department of Transport.
International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism, 1999				Does not come under the remit of Department of Transport.
International Convention for the Suppression of Acts of Nuclear Terrorism, 2005				Does not come under the remit of Department of Transport.
International Ship and Port Facility Security Code (ISPS Code)				Codes do not require separate ratification. This Code is part of SOLAS and is also covered by EU Regulation 725/2004
Convention on the Code of Conduct for Liner Conferences (Geneva, 1974)				Does not come under the remit of Department of Transport.

Questions - Written Answers

Convention/Protocol/Code	In full	In Part	To Commence	Comments
United Nations Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods, (Vienna, 1980)				Does not come under the remit of Department of Transport.
United Nations Convention on Conditions for Registration of Ships, (Geneva, 1986)				Not in force internationally
International Convention for the Unification of Certain Rules Relating on Maritime Liens and Mortgages (with protocol of Signature), 1926			X	There are no plans at present to ratify these conventions.
International Convention for the Unification of Certain Rules relating to Maritime Liens and Mortgages, 1967			X	There are no plans at present to ratify these conventions.
International Convention on Maritime Liens and Mortgages, 1993			X	There are no plans at present to ratify these conventions.
International Convention Relating to the Arrest of Sea-Going Ships, 1952				Acceded to in 1990
International Convention on the Arrest of Ships, 1999				Does not come under the remit of Department of Transport.
International Convention for the Unification of Certain Rules of Law relating to Bills of Lading, 1924 (Hague Rules)			X	Ireland is not part Uncitral and no plans to ratify these conventions
Protocol to Amend the International Convention for the Unification of Certain Rules of Law Relating to Bills of Lading, 1968 (Hague-Visby Rules)			X	Ireland is not part Uncitral and no plans to ratify these conventions
United Nations Convention on the Carriage of Goods by Sea, 1978 (Hamburg Rules)			X	Ireland is not part Uncitral and no plans to ratify these conventions
United Nations Convention on Carriage of Goods (Wholly or Partly) by Sea, 2008 (Rotterdam Rules)			X	Ireland is not part Uncitral and no plans to ratify these conventions
United Nations Convention on International Multimodal Transport of Goods, 1980			X	Ireland is not part Uncitral and no plans to ratify these conventions
Athens Convention Relating to the Carriage of Passengers and their Luggage by Sea, 1974 (Athens Convention)	X			SI 552/2012 in relation to the Liability of Carriers of passengers by sea implements EU Regulation 392/2009
Protocol of 2002 to the Athens Convention relating to the Carriage of Passengers and their Luggage by Sea, 1974 (Athens Convention 2002)	X			SI 552/2012 in relation to the Liability of Carriers of passengers by sea implements EU Regulation 392/2009
Guidelines for the Implementation of the Athens Convention Relating to the Carriage of Passengers and their Luggage by Sea, 2002 (IMO Reservation and Guidelines 2006)				While guidelines are not required to be ratified, EU Regulation 392/2009 incorporates and makes binding parts of the IMO Guidelines.
Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC 2006)	X			
C188 - Work in Fishing Convention, 2007 (No. 188)			X	Directive 2017/259 implementing the social partners' agreement for the Work in Fishing Convention has been transposed providing for the majority of the requirements of the Convention. Requires primary legislation for ratification - drafting of general scheme underway.
Convention for the Unification of Certain Rules of Law respecting Assistance and Salvage at Sea, 1910				Over-ridden by the 1989 Convention on Salvage
Protocol of 1967 to amend the Convention for the Unification of Certain Rules of Law relating to Assistance and Salvage at Sea of 23 September 1910				Over-ridden by the 1989 Convention on Salvage
International Convention on Salvage, 1989	X			
Nairobi International Convention on the Removal of Wrecks, 2007 (Nairobi Convention)			X	Primary Legislation required

Convention/Protocol/Code	In full	In Part	To Commence	Comments
York-Antwerp Rules				The Department of Transport has no records relating to Rules, Conventions and Guidelines, which appear to relate to commercial issues around insurance and may in some case have been superseded by the 1957 Protocol and 1976 Convention on limitation of liability
CMI Guidelines Relating to General Average				The Department of Transport has no records relating to Rules, Conventions and Guidelines, which appear to relate to commercial issues around insurance and may in some case have been superseded by the 1957 Protocol and 1976 Convention on limitation of liability
International Convention for the Unification of Certain Rules of Law Relating to Collision between Vessels, 1910				The Department of Transport has no records relating to Rules, Conventions and Guidelines, which appear to relate to commercial issues around insurance and may in some case have been superseded by the 1957 Protocol and 1976 Convention on limitation of liability
International Convention on Certain Rules Concerning Civil Jurisdiction in Matters of Collision, 1952				The Department of Transport has no records relating to Rules, Conventions and Guidelines, which appear to relate to commercial issues around insurance and may in some case have been superseded by the 1957 Protocol and 1976 Convention on limitation of liability
The Draft International Convention for the Unification of Certain Rules Concerning Civil Jurisdiction, Choice of Law, and Recognition and Enforcement of Judgments in Matters of Collision, 1977 (Rio Rules 1977)				The Department of Transport has no records relating to Rules, Conventions and Guidelines, which appear to relate to commercial issues around insurance and may in some case have been superseded by the 1957 Protocol and 1976 Convention on limitation of liability
International Convention for the Unification of Certain Rules of Law Relating to Penal Jurisdiction in Matters of Collisions or Other Incidents of Navigation, 1952				The Department of Transport has no records relating to Rules, Conventions and Guidelines, which appear to relate to commercial issues around insurance and may in some case have been superseded by the 1957 Protocol and 1976 Convention on limitation of liability
International Convention for the Unification of Certain Rules of Law relating to the Limitation of the Liability of Owners of Sea-Going Ships, 1924				The Department of Transport has no records relating to Rules, Conventions and Guidelines, which appear to relate to commercial issues around insurance and may in some case have been superseded by the 1957 Protocol and 1976 Convention on limitation of liability
International Convention relating to the Limitation of the Liability of Owners of Sea-Going Ships, 1957 and Protocol of Signature	X			
Convention on Limitation of Liability for Maritime Claims, 1976 (LLMC Convention)	X			
Protocol of 1996 to Amend the Convention on Limitation of Liability for Maritime Claims of 19 November 1976 (1996 LLMC Protocol)	X			

Questions - Written Answers

Convention/Protocol/Code	In full	In Part	To Commence	Comments
Resolution LEG.5(99) (Adopted On 19 April 2012) on the Adoption of Amendments of the Limitation Amounts in the Protocol of 1996 to the Convention on Limitation of Liability for Maritime Claims, 1976				Amendments do not require separate ratification but legislation may be needed to give effect to such amendments
Law Of Maritime Safety				
International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), 1974	X			Primary legislation is required for any amendments to SOLAS Convention after 2012
International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) Protocol, 1978	X			Primary legislation is required for any amendments to SOLAS Convention after 2012
International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) Protocol, 1988	X			Primary legislation is required for any amendments to SOLAS Convention after 2012
Consolidated version SOLAS, 2018				Does not require ratification - consolidated text of the Conventions
International Convention on Load Lines, 1966	X			
1988 Protocol to the International Convention on Load Lines, 1966	X			
Amendments to 1988 Protocol to the International Convention on Load Lines				Amendments to Conventions do not require individual ratification although legislation may be required to give effect to amendments
International Convention on Tonnage Measurements of Ships, 1969	X			
Amendments to the International Convention on Tonnage Measurements of Ships 1969				Amendments to Conventions do not require individual ratification although legislation may be required to give effect to amendments
Convention on the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea, 1972 (COLREGs)	X			
International Convention for Safe Containers (CSC) 1972			X	
1993 Amendments to the International Convention for Safe Containers (CSC)				Amendments to Conventions do not require individual ratification although legislation may be required to give effect to amendments
Amendments to the International Convention for Safe Containers (CSC) 1972 (1)				Amendments to Conventions do not require individual ratification although legislation may be required to give effect to amendments
Amendments to the International Convention for Safe Containers (CSC) 1972 (2)				Amendments to Conventions do not require individual ratification although legislation may be required to give effect to amendments
Torremolinos International Convention for the Safety of Fishing Vessels, 1977	X			
Cape Town Agreement of 2012 on the Implementation of the Provisions of the Torremolinos Protocol of 1993 Relating to the Torremolinos International Convention for the Safety of Fishing Vessels, 1977 (1)			X	Requires primary legislation for ratification - drafting of general scheme underway
International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping of Seafarers (STCW) 1978	X			
International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping of Seafarers (STCW) 1978, as amended				Amendments to Conventions do not require individual ratification although legislation may be required to give effect to amendments

Convention/Protocol/Code	In full	In Part	To Commence	Comments
International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Fishing Vessel Personnel (STCW-F), 1995			X	Requires primary legislation for ratification - drafting of general scheme underway
International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, 1979	X			
Amendments to International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue, 1979 (1)				Amendments to Conventions do not require individual ratification although legislation may be required to give effect to amendments
Convention on the International Maritime Satellite Organization				Not a member of the organisation or party to the Convention
Safety Codes				
Code of Safe Practice for Cargo Stowage and Securing (CSS Code) (1)				Does not require individual ratification but is either referred to or encompassed into the relevant convention
Code of Safe Practice for Cargo Stowage and Securing (CSS Code) (2)				Does not require individual ratification but is either referred to or encompassed into the relevant convention
Code of Safe Practice for Cargo Stowage and Securing (CSS Code) (3)				Does not require individual ratification but is either referred to or encompassed into the relevant convention
International Maritime Solid Bulk Cargoes Code (IMSBC Code)				Does not require individual ratification but is either referred to or encompassed into the relevant convention
International Code for the Safe Carriage of Grain in Bulk (International Grain Code)				Does not require individual ratification but is either referred to or encompassed into the relevant convention
Code of Safe Practice for Ships Carrying Timber Deck Cargoes (TDC Code)				Does not require individual ratification but is either referred to or encompassed into the relevant convention
International Maritime Dangerous Goods Code (IMDG Code)				Does not require individual ratification but is either referred to or encompassed into the relevant convention
International Code for the Construction and Equipment of Ships Carrying Dangerous Chemicals in Bulk (IBC Code)				Does not require individual ratification but is either referred to or encompassed into the relevant convention
International Code for the Construction and Equipment of Ships Carrying Liquefied Gases in Bulk (IGC Code)				Does not require individual ratification but is either referred to or encompassed into the relevant convention
International Code for the Safe Carriage of Packaged Irradiated Nuclear Fuel, Plutonium and High-Level Radioactive Wastes on Board Ships (INF Code)				Does not require individual ratification but is either referred to or encompassed into the relevant convention
International Safety Management Code (ISM Code)				Does not require individual ratification but is either referred to or encompassed into the relevant convention
International Code of Safety for Ships Operating in Polar Waters (Polar Code)				Does not require individual ratification but is either referred to or encompassed into the relevant convention
Principles of Safe Manning				Does not require individual ratification but is either referred to or encompassed into the relevant convention

Convention/Protocol/Code	In full	In Part	To Commence	Comments
Procedures for Port State Control, 2017				Does not require individual ratification but is either referred to or encompassed into the relevant convention

### Driver Test

212. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Transport when he expects the Road Safety Authority, RSA, to be in a position to roll out and make online theory tests available to the general public to deal with the backlog that has developed; his views on whether the cancellation of some of these tests is having a serious knock-on effect and causing great distress to many persons as in the case of a person (details supplied) who wishes to avail of the online testing service; the steps he can take to expedite this process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12582/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton) :** I can assure the Deputy that the Department is very aware of the challenges facing the RSA and its contract provider as they work hard to further manage the backlog in the Driver Theory Testing Service.

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

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 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.

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.

As the scheduling of candidates is the statutory responsibility of the Road Safety Authority (RSA) and their contract provider, I have no power to intervene in individual cases.

### Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

213. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport the amount of state aid that has been granted to the Shannon Airport Authority since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. [12587/21]

10 March 2021

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton) :** 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. Shannon Airport (as part of Shannon Group) has availed of many of these horizontal business supports, many of which have been extended into 2021.

In addition to these economy wide measures, €6.1 million in emergency funding was approved by Government in June 2020 to assist Shannon Airport complete a hold baggage screening project, which had been suspended due to the impacts of Covid. This funding was provided to ensure ongoing compliance with security requirements under EU Regulation 2015/1998.

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 Shannon and Cork Airports under a new Programme for regional State airports. Capital funding requests from Shannon Airport under this Programme are currently being assessed by my Department.

In addition, supplementary support schemes have been developed to help address liquidity issues at our airports as a result of Covid-19. These new schemes were approved by the European Commission on 24 February and have a budget of €26m.

One of these schemes will help to compensate State airports, including Shannon, 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. Shannon Airport will shortly be invited to apply for funding under this new Scheme.

### **Airport Policy**

214. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport the provisions that have been made to secure additional cargo flights for Shannon Airport. [12588/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton) :** As the Deputy may be aware, Shannon Airport Authority has statutory responsibility to operate, manage and develop Shannon Airport. Shannon Airport Authority is a subsidiary of Shannon Group which is a commercial State Body.

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

### **Rail Network**

215. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Transport the full cost of hiring rail-road vehicles for each of the past five years; if the same company has fulfilled the contract for each of those years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12614/21]

**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 day-to-day operations of public transport.

The issue raised is an operational matter for Iarnród Éireann and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply.

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

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

216. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to address the issue of long wait times for driver test dates to issue due to the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12628/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard 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 Covid-19 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 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.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

217. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to address the issue of driver lessons not continuing during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12629/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard 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 and minimising social contact.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

218. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to concerns among residents in Lucan, County Dublin due to the high volume of activity at Weston Airport; the restrictions in place on activity at the airport; and the measures in place to ensure all public health guidelines in relation to international travel are adhered to by those arriving into Ireland through the airport. [12638/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton) :** At Level 5, the public health risk means that people are asked to stay at home, except for travel for work, education or other essential purposes. The operation of an airport is considered to be an essential service and as such Weston Airport is permitted to stay open to ensure essential activities continue. All public health regulations and guidelines must be strictly adhered to and operational procedures must be in line with HSE Covid procedures.

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

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

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

The Department of Justice has advised that its Border Management Unit (BMU) recently contacted Weston Airport management reminding them of their obligations in relation to incoming flights from outside the State. This includes forwarding all relevant documentation (such as PLF and negative COVID 19 test results for all applicable arrivals) to Immigration Officers prior to the flight's arrival. The BMU liaises with Weston Airport and other stakeholders such as An Garda Síochána regarding incoming flights on an ongoing basis.

### **National Car Test**

219. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport the threshold for failure and the degree to which failure is classed in the context of rear brake light inspection of cars in national car tests, NCT; and if two working brake lights on either side of the car is sufficient

on car models in which a third brake light has been installed by the manufacturer on the rear window screen. [12692/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton) :** The operation of the National Car Test (NCT) service is the statutory responsibility of the Road Safety Authority. I have therefore referred the question to the Authority for direct reply.

I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

### Penalty Points System

220. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the number of penalty points issued by age and gender in 2020 and to date in 2021. [12720/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton) :** The details requested are provided in the two tabular tables below. The data provided for 2021 covers the period from January and February only. The number of penalty points issued for 2020 and 2021 is based on the driver records endorsed on the National Vehicle and Driver File with total number of penalty points issued.

**Table 1: Number of Drivers broken down by Gender and number of penalty points issued in 2020.**

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-10\_pq220-10-03-21\_en.docx">Table 1</a>]

**Table 2: Number of Drivers broken down by Gender and number of penalty points issued in 2021 (January and February).**

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-10\_pq220a-10-03-21\_en.docx">Table 2</a>]

*Note:* No Gender or Age Recorded\* refers to drivers who have a foreign driving licence with an Irish address and non-resident drivers who pay on the spot penalty fines - these drivers do not have an Irish driving licence record on the NVDF and there is no details on gender or age available for these records.

### Road Projects

221. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport when constructions work on the Athy southern distributor road will commence. [12721/21]

**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. State grants, where applicable, are intended to supplement the funding allocated to the maintenance and improvement of roads by local authorities from their own resources.

The National Development Plan (NDP) does provide for the gradual build up in funding for the road network but funding is not yet at the level needed for the adequate maintenance and renewal of regional and local roads. For this reason the primary focus for capital investment

continues to be the maintenance and renewal of the network with some limited investment in road improvement schemes. In this context 12 regional and local road improvement projects were identified for development, subject to necessary approvals, in the NDP and the construction of a Distributor Road to the south of Athy connecting to the N78 is one of those schemes. Implementation of the programme of projects is on a phased basis and progression of each project is subject to the profile of annual capital allocations available to the Department.

Under the Public Spending Code and the terms and conditions applying to regional and local road grants, capital projects are subject to review and approval at a number of stages. In this context, my Department recently approved this project to proceed to tender for the main construction contract.

### **Public Transport**

222. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the number of child fares or equivalent fare types sold in 2019 and 2020 by the main public transport providers. [12722/21]

**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 regulation of fares and for the collection and publication of statistics in relation to public passenger transport services. 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.

### **Cycling Facilities**

223. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport the implications of the approval of planning permission for a cycleway on the Malahide estuary in terms of the new possibilities this opens up for the Sandymount cycle route; and if he has discussed same with the city manager. [12744/21]

**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 in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA), including cycling 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.

### **Bus Services**

224. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport the adjustments that have been made to the BusConnects plan in view of the likelihood of a significant number of persons working from home in the future. [12745/21]

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

At a policy level I firmly believe that high-quality public transport will still be necessary as we recover from the longer term effects of the current pandemic, notwithstanding the changes it may bring about to certain aspects of our behaviour, such as the traditional commute.

Obviously, issues in relation to potentially changed commuting demand will need to be reflected in the development of Preliminary Business Cases for transport projects in the future but I would note that the Central Statistics Office's *National Travel Survey* shows us that commuting accounts for less than 25% of all trips. Projects that can facilitate high-density residential development, support localised travel, and/or provide connectivity to citizens wishing to undertake a wide range of daily activities will continue to have a place in our investment programme in my opinion.

In relation to the specific impacts on BusConnects, the National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure, including BusConnects Dublin.

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.

### Rail Network

225. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport if the preliminary business case for the MetroLink project has been submitted to Government; when he expects it to be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12751/21]

226. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport when the railway order application for the MetroLink project is proposed to be submitted to An Bord Pleanála; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12752/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 225 and 226 together.

As the Deputy is likely aware, the *Public Spending Code* sets out the requirements for the evaluation, planning and management of public investment projects in Ireland and the *Code* applies to all public bodies and to all bodies whose projects are supported by Exchequer capital funding.

The *Code* sets out a number of Decision Gates in the development of a project proposal; these are points where major decisions need to be made about the progress of a project and, for projects expected to cost over €100million, Government approval is required at these stages. For a project in this category, "Decision Gate 1: Preliminary Business Case" is the first stage where the *Public Spending Code* stipulates that formal Government approval is required.

In accordance with the *Public Spending Code's* requirements, prior to seeking Government approval the Preliminary Business Case must first be approved by the Approving Authority, in this case the National Transport Authority, and is then subject to review by both my Department and the Department for Public Expenditure and Reform. Following completion of these necessary steps I will then bring the matter to Government for its decision.

Approval under "Decision Gate 1: Preliminary Business Case" is required prior to any application to An Bord Pleanála for a Railway Order and therefore that will be dependent upon Government's decision in respect of the Preliminary Business Case.

### **Transport Infrastructure Provision**

227. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the policy on greyways; if segregation will be a key component and or minimum standard of any such development; if he plans to engage with cycling advocacy groups when developing policy; the pilot schemes that have been identified; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12753/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** In relation to hard shoulders on wide single carriageway roads and the possible provision of cycle lanes (sometimes referred to as greyways), the engineering inspectorate within the regional and local roads division of my Department is giving consideration to the treatment of these hard shoulders and preparing suitable guidance for local authorities.

There are a number of ways in which cycle lanes could be provided but it is important that any such provision take account of traffic speeds, the degree of segregation required, the most suitable way of providing segregation (where required) and short and long term maintenance requirements.

In addition, this guidance will be developed in the context of international best practice, further development of the national cycle manual by NTA and developments of national roads standards by TII and relevant consultation.

### **Transport Infrastructure Provision**

228. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport the position of his Department on quietways and the roll-out of same across the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12754/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The improvement and maintenance of public regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority, in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from local authorities' own resources supplemented by State grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the local authority.

My Department is currently giving consideration to the scope for repurposing certain tertiary roads as "quiet lanes" suitable for use as cycle routes. In the context of examining updates to the Traffic Signs Manual, consideration will be given to designing a new sign to delineate such routes and to developing an associated Advice Note for local authorities.

If such a policy is adopted following consideration, a pilot programme will be considered for implementation in 2022.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

229. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport if he will put additional financial supports in place for the aviation sector in the wake of Covid-19 given recent announcements by airlines of further job losses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12784/21]

263. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to introduce an income support scheme for workers in the aviation industry along the lines of the scheme introduced in Germany which enables employers to reduce hours rather than laying off staff and

provides up to 60% income replacement for the time employees cannot work; the analysis his Department has carried out into the cost of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13553/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton) :** I propose to take Questions Nos. 229 and 263 together.

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

As regards supports specifically targeted at the protection of employment, the Employment Wage Subsidy Schemes (EWSS) has been a key component of the Government's response to the COVID-19 crisis to support viable firms and encourage employment amid these very challenging times 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.

### Ports Traffic

230. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Transport the average number of haulage trucks that arrive into Irish ports on a weekly basis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12803/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** Provisional figures for 2020 from the Irish Maritime Development Office indicate the average weekly RoRo Units for export and imports arriving at Irish Ports was 22,560. The breakdown of this figure is as follows:

Provisional figures for 2020	Number
Average Weekly RoRo Units 2020	22,560
Average Imports	11,378
Average Exports	11,182

The Central Statistic Office release statistics on port traffic on a quarterly basis. Details on Q3 2020 port traffic were released on the 21st of January 2021 (for ease of reference, see link <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/spt/statisticsofporttrafficquarter32020/>).

## Córas Iompair Éireann

231. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Transport if a pension increase will issue to CIÉ group pensioners during the current review. [12804/21]

232. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Transport if there has been an analysis carried out by his Department of the CIÉ pension scheme given the lack of post retirement increase and the underfunding of the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12805/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 231 and 232 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.

I am also forwarding the Deputy’s questions to CIÉ for direct response. Please advise my private office if a response is not received within ten working days.

## Rail Network

233. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department conducted a policy review for the development of a rail link from Limerick to Shannon Airport. [12806/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Deputy is aware, the *draft Limerick-Shannon Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy (LSMATS)* was published by the National Transport Authority (NTA) in collaboration with Limerick City and County Council, Clare County Council and Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) in September 2020 and was open for public consultation for 8 weeks.

Submissions received during that public consultation are currently under review and I understand that the NTA is also conducting further analytical work to inform the next iteration of the *Strategy*. I understand that among the issues raised during the public consultation related to the role of rail in the region, including potential connectivity to Shannon, and that role is under further examination by the NTA.

I believe a further public consultation on a revised *Strategy* will be held during Q2.

## Bus Éireann

234. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport the reason Bus Éireann has increased the fare from Kenmare to Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12829/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. I am not involved in operational aspects of public transport such as fares. Following the establishment of the National Transport Authority (NTA) in December 2009, the NTA is the statutory body with responsibility for the regulation of fares charged to passengers in respect of public transport services provided under public service contracts.

Therefore, I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply. Please inform my private office if a response is not received within ten working days.

### **Pilot Training Courses**

235. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if flight training schools can operate civilian training flights during level 5 public health restrictions; if so, the way in which they have been advised regarding travel distance restrictions while in flight; and if civilians and non-essential workers are permitted to travel beyond 5 km from their primary residence in order to participate in practical flying tuition. [12852/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** At Level 5, the public health risk means that people are asked to stay at home, except for travel for work, education or other essential purposes. Attending a flight training school is considered to fall within the category of education. On 6 January 2021, the government announced that all higher, further and adult education should remain primarily online. However, where such activities cannot be done remotely, such as practical and skills-based tuition, limited on-site presence is permitted and those attending such tuition can travel beyond the general restricted 5 km limit.

Flight training is an educational activity that requires direct non-remote interaction with aircraft which cannot be replaced with online alternatives. Attendees of a flight school are attending a recognised training organisation and therefore may travel outside the 5km radius from where they reside. Not all those attending flight schools are necessarily trainee pilots. Some may already be qualified and employed commercial pilots attending the flight school to acquire a particular additional qualification or rating. As such they would be qualified pilots and considered essential workers. The completion of pilot training courses is time critical and attendees must complete flight training within regulated timeframes.

All public health regulations and guidelines must be strictly adhered to and operational and cockpit procedures of the flight school must be in line with HSE Covid procedures.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

236. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to extend expiry dates for initial basic training certificates of satisfactory completion for motorcyclists during Covid-19 level 5 restrictions similar to the extensions provided in respect of NCT and driver licences as a result of the pandemic restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12861/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Dur-

ing the first lockdown from March of last year, my predecessor extended the validity period of Initial Basic Training (IBT) certificates, and I can confirm that the Road Safety Authority (RSA) has recently submitted a proposal to my Department for a further extension. This is currently being considered within my Department. No decision has yet been made.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

237. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Transport if motorcycle driving lessons for persons not currently on a waiting list for a motorcycle driver test can take place under level 5 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12862/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** The provision of driving instruction has been defined in legislation introduced by my colleague, the Minister for Health, as an essential service that may continue under level 5 restrictions, albeit in extremely limited circumstances.

Both Essential Driver Training (EDT) for cars and Initial Basic Training (IBT) for motorcycles are currently suspended. Approved Driving Instructors (ADIs) may continue to provide lessons to both driving and motorcycle learners, but only in such circumstances where the learner in question has already completed their required modules and has been scheduled a test date.

While I fully appreciate the inconvenience this poses to learners who have not yet completed their training, I am sure the Deputy will agree with me that the limiting of the spread of the virus and the safeguarding of public health must take first priority here.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

238. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Transport if truck driving lessons for persons not currently on a waiting list for a truck driver test can take place under level 5 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12863/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** The provision of driving instruction has been defined in legislation introduced by my colleague, the Minister for Health, as an essential service that may continue under level 5 restrictions, albeit in extremely limited circumstances.

Approved Driving Instructors (ADIs) may continue to provide lessons to learners across all vehicle categories, but only in such circumstances where the learner in question has already completed their required modules and has been scheduled a test date.

While I fully appreciate the inconvenience this poses to learners who have not yet completed their training, I am sure the Deputy will agree with me that the limiting of the spread of the virus and the safeguarding of public health must take first priority here.

### **Driver Test**

239. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the estimated cost of hiring one additional driver tester. [12902/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** As the Road Safety Authority (RSA), who have statutory responsibility for the operation of the driver testing service, is entirely self-funded, I have referred this question to the Authority for direct reply. I ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

### **Driver Test**

240. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the fact that some learner drivers cannot bring their children to school or travel to work as they cannot sit a driver test and the waiting list for a test could be up to 30 weeks when testing resumes; the way in which he plans to address same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12903/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** I can assure you that the Department is very aware of the challenges facing the RSA as they work hard to further manage the backlog in the Driver Testing Service. I acknowledge that there are many different cohorts across all areas of society who have been impacted by the increased demand on the service.

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 Covid-19 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 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.

241. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if the RSA submitted a request for 80 additional driver testers in October 2020; the reason the request has not yet been met; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12904/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** In late 2020, the RSA presented an initial plan to the Department outlining its proposals for carrying out its functions under the COVID Framework. This plan included proposed measures needed to reduce current waiting times. Amongst the range of options outlined, the RSA sought sanction to recruit 80 additional testers.

My Department examined this request in detail in relation to its robustness and deliverability, while also taking into account financial and other implications. Following this review, my Department approved the hiring of 40 temporary driver testers. This was subsequently also approved by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. These new hires will be in addition to the 36 temporary testers that I previously gave sanction to rehire during the latter part of 2020.

I would like to point out that the provision of extra testers will not on its own suffice to address the problem. One of the difficulties is with the reduced capacity of driving test centres, given limits on throughput due to Covid restrictions. Even with the additional 40 recruits, the RSA will need to look at possible additional temporary test centres.

The Department and the RSA will monitor how the new testers are impacting the system as they come on stream from June 2021 and as the Covid restriction level reduces. I will keep the situation under review as to whether further recruitment of additional testers will be necessary in the latter half of 2021.

### **Airport Landing Slots**

242. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if he plans to extend the 80:20 use it or lose it slot allocation rule for airlines that is set to expire at the end of March; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12905/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** Regulation (EU) 2021/250, providing temporary relief from the slot utilisation rules at Union airports due to the COVID-19 crisis, was published in the Official Journal of the European Union on 19 February 2021 and entered into force the following day.

This Regulation does not replicate the previous waiver of the 80:20 slot usage rule, but It does provide some alleviation by means of a reduced obligation to operate allocated airports slots, and permits a portion of those allocated slots to be protected if handed back within a set period. It has also granted the European Commission the power to adopt delegated acts until 21 February 2022.

For information, the text of this regulation can be found at this link: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/reg/2021/250>.

### **Aviation Industry**

243. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the value of financial requests submitted by airlines here during the ongoing pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12906/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** The Government has put in place a range of supports for businesses, including those in the aviation sector. The supports include the wage subsidy scheme, alleviation of commercial rates, deferral of tax liabilities, the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme, the Credit Guarantee Scheme, and the SBCI Working Capital Scheme. My Department has estimated that over €100 million in operational supports has already been made available to Irish airlines under a number of these schemes.

Liquidity support is also made available through the ISIF Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund, and €150 million has been invested in debt funding in Aer Lingus. This investment is designed to complement ongoing investment by Aer Lingus's parent company, International Airlines Group (IAG), in the airline.

It remains open to airlines to engage directly with the relevant agencies concerned with a view to drawing down supports, and the amount of any such funding sought would be a commercial matter for the airlines concerned.

*Question No. 244 answered with Question No. 207.*

### **Driver Test**

245. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport when driver tests and lessons will resume; the additional protections that will be provided to driver testers and approved driving instructors to ensure their safety at work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12908/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** The operation of the Driver Testing Service is the statutory responsibility of the Road Safety Authority (RSA), and as such the RSA, and its service providers, are responsible for the health and safety of staff under health and safety legislation, including assessments of their various functions, and developing safety protocols to ensure the safety of their workers and customers.

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.

Level 5 legislation defines driving instruction as an essential service "where the person receiving instruction has a booking reserved to undergo a test". To have a booking reserved is understood here as to have been allocated a specific time and date for a test, as opposed to have only applied for one.

These limitations in both services will remain in place until level 5 restrictions are eased.

The RSA have provided the Department with comprehensive information concerning the measures that have been put in place across all their services to ensure they can continue in a safe manner and in line with HSE and HSA guidelines.

Public services must be delivered in a safe way. The driving test involves challenges because of the need for drivers to sit in the same vehicle with test candidates, and to move between vehicles which are not controlled working environments.

The Road Safety Authority, which is responsible for driver testing, has worked with medical

advice to ensure that the service is as safe as possible, but this means a reduction in capacity of 42%.

It is a tribute to the success of the health protocols that, although thousands of driving tests have taken place, there has been no case of transmission of Covid-19 through a driving test.

Approved Driving Instructors (ADIS) are entirely independent operators and neither the Road Safety Authority nor the Department can dictate how they run their individual businesses. It is up to each driving instructor or driving school to make the appropriate choices to protect themselves and their families.

## Transport Policy

246. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Transport if there are any changes for trailers (details supplied); if there are regulations being introduced for trailers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12913/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** The Deputy may be aware that I recently signed into law the *European Union (Road Vehicles: Type-Approval and Market Surveillance) Regulations* (S.I. No. 556 of 2020). These Regulations set out the requirements for new types of trailers and extensions for existing types of trailers.

Trailer types that have been approved under the previous *European Union (Road Vehicles: Type-Approval: Entry into Service) Regulations* (S.I. 157 of 2009) remain unaffected. There is no specific change for trailers over 10 ft in length and the existing masses and dimensions requirements for such trailers have not changed.

The Deputy may wish to note for his information that an amendment to the *Road Traffic (Construction and Use of Vehicles) Regulations 2003* (S.I. No. 5 of 2003) is included in my Department's legislative programme for 2021. These Regulations give further effect in Irish law to Regulation (EU) 2019/1242 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019, amending Council Directive 96/53/EC of 25 July 1996, laying down for certain road vehicles circulating within the EU the maximum authorised dimensions and weights in national and international traffic. In particular, these Regulations increase the maximum permitted weights and dimensions of relevant types of vehicle in specified circumstances (including vehicle combinations which are towing trailers), in order to facilitate the use of zero-emission vehicles. No further regulations in relation to trailers are anticipated at this time.

## Departmental Internships

247. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Transport the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under his aegis in 2019; the cost in wages and allowances; and the estimated numerical capacity of State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis. [12965/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I have referred the Deputy's question to the State and semi-State agencies under the aegis of my Department for direct reply. Please advise my private office if a reply is not received within 10 working days.

## Road Safety

248. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to make the wearing of high-visibility clothing compulsory for cyclists and pedestrians. [13011/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** To create a statutory obligation on the wearing of reflective clothing would entail making it a criminal offence under Road Traffic legislation. A person in breach of such a provision would fall to be issued with a fixed charge notice or summonsed to court, depending on what procedure would be put in place for the processing of such offences.

I believe that the wearing of such clothing is best pursued by way of educational and publicity campaigns run by the Road Safety Authority (RSA) rather than by pursuing a punitive approach to the issue.

Indeed, the RSA, which has responsibility for the promotion of road safety awareness, advertising and the dissemination of road safety information, has already undertaken a number of campaigns to promote awareness among pedestrians and cyclists of the need for visibility on our roads.

Several million high visibility vests, armbands, rucksack covers and other such items have been distributed by the RSA, an Garda Síochána, Road Safety Officers, Age Action and the Vintners Federation in recent years. A number of measures have also been included in the Road Safety Strategy 2013-2020 aimed at increasing the wearing of high visibility clothing among pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists. The Rules of the Road also include a strong recommendation supporting the wearing of light, and preferably high-visibility, clothing.

### **Driver Licences**

249. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the difficulties experienced by drivers who have taken up normal residence in Ireland within the past 12 months and need to exchange their driver licences; and if he will consider an extension to the one-year timeframe in view of these difficulties. [13040/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** A person can drive on a foreign licence for up to a year as a visitor to Ireland. This provision is provided for under the 1949 Geneva Convention. A person resident in Ireland must have an Irish or EU driving licence to drive here.

The current average processing time for exchanging a licence is 12 -15 working days, but can take up to 3 months depending on the licence and the necessary checks that have to be made. The recent extension of validity for Irish driving licences will ease the pressure on the National Driver Licence Service (NDLS) and is expected to reduce processing times.

Under the current Level 5 restrictions, appointments for attendance at an NDLS centre are only available to essential workers. An application for a licence exchange can be made online if the applicant has a verified MyGovId account which requires a Public Services Card.

### **Road Network**

250. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Transport if funding will be provided to assist farmers in the construction of agricultural underpass crossings on non-national roads in cases in which such facilities are deemed essential in the interests of public safety, particularly road safety; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13071/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. While my Department provides grant support to assist local authorities with the maintenance and renewal of regional and local roads, a grant programme for the provision of road underpasses is not under consideration.

### **Driver Licences**

251. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Transport if he will address a matter concerning the renewal of a driver licence (details supplied); when a refund will issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13177/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** All inquiries relating to driver licensing are handled by the National Driver Licence Service (NDLS), operated by the Road Safety Authority (RSA). My Department does not have access to individual applications. Having said that, the matter the Deputy has raised has been noted by my Department.

More generally, I can advise the Deputy that a further extension to the expiry dates of driving licences has been introduced in response to the continued disruption caused by Covid-19 to driver licensing services in Ireland and across the EU. The extension will apply to different groups of licence holders including those who benefited from extensions in 2020.

A new driving licence will not be issued for the extension period. The RSA will automatically update driver records to show the new expiry date. The NDLS may not be able to process a submitted application to renew a driving licence if the driver record has been updated and is already showing the new expiry date for the driving licence. Any original supporting documents, submitted with an application form, will be returned and refunds will be made where applicable.

### **Public Transport**

252. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Transport the cost of real-time systems used by public transport operators (details supplied). [13217/21]

**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 Real Time Passenger Information.

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 a reply is not received within 10 days.

### **Electric Vehicles**

253. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the number of vehicles in use that are totally reliant on electricity propulsion; his expectations for the future in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13234/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Providing a sustainable, low-carbon

transport system is a key priority of my Department. The Programme for Government commits to 7% average annual emissions reduction to 2030; ultimately, the goal is for a zero-emission mobility system by 2050. Electrification will be key to achieving this objective in the transport sector.

Electric vehicles (EVs) are the most prominent transport mitigation measure in the 2019 *Climate Action Plan*, and Ireland has set an ambitious target of 936,000 EVs on our roads by 2030. This target is challenging but indicates the scale of the transformation that is needed across all sectors if Ireland is to achieve its climate targets in the coming years. The Government, supported by the work of the *Low Emission Vehicle Taskforce*, has worked to ensure that conditions and policies are in place to support citizens in making greener vehicle choices. As the Deputy will be aware, a comprehensive suite of measures is available to EV drivers, including purchase grants for private car owners and taxi drivers, VRT relief, reduced tolls, home charger grants, favourable motor and BIK tax rates, as well as a comprehensive charging network. These measures have collectively contributed to increased take up of EVs in Ireland in recent years, albeit from a low base. There are currently around 28,000 EVs under taxation in Ireland and, of these, according to recent figures from the National Vehicle and Driver File, 14,363 fully electric vehicles are registered in Ireland.

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

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

Finally, building on the eSPSV grant scheme that was in place for the last 2 years, I have introduced an EV scrappage scheme to support taxi and hackney drivers switching from older vehicles to EVs.

### National Car Test

254. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Transport the reason that persons, who had NCT tests due before 28 March 2020, were not given a four-month extension on their NCT validity despite the fact that they could not secure tests in NCT centres for a number of months thus resulting in some drivers having only seven to eight months NCT certificate validity after testing; the reason the four-month extension was not granted across the board in view of the exceptional circumstances at the time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13304/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** I would clarify for the Deputy that the applicable dates for periodic roadworthiness testing are provided for by national legislation. Under Regulation 3(2) of the Road Traffic (National Car

Test) Regulations 2017 (S.I. No. 415/2017), the initial test due date for a vehicle is determined using the date of registration of that vehicle and subsequent test due dates fall on anniversaries of that date. Accordingly, all test due dates are predetermined based on the date of registration of a vehicle. Any NCT certificate issued in respect of a vehicle is only valid up to the test due date that falls after that certificate was issued and does not constitute a 12 month warranty for their condition.

As the Deputy notes, the Road Traffic (National Car Test) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 amended the Road Traffic (National Car Test) Regulations 2017 (S.I. No. 415 of 2017) to provide an exceptional 4 month extension to test due dates for vehicles with a NCT certificate expiry date on or after 28th March 2020, where the vehicle was not first registered after August 2016. The extension was directly linked to the suspension of NCT services in March 2020 due to Covid 19 and was granted to extend the validity of NCT certificates which would have expired at a time when it was not possible to renew such certificates.

The suspension permitted the NCT Service to put in place a comprehensive range of measures to ensure compliance with public health advice and health and safety guidelines which facilitated resumption of services from July 2020.

### **Driver Test**

255. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Transport if a driver theory test will be made available for persons that must complete the test in order to attend an institution of education under current restrictions, such as the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13355/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** The Driver Theory Test has not been deemed to be an essential service under Level 5 restrictions. The service will remain closed while level 5 restrictions remain in place. No exceptions will be made regardless of the circumstances. 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.

While the service remains closed at present, a plan is being progressed to increase capacity from an average pre Covid19 level of 15,000 appointments up to 50,000 appointments per calendar month. This will help manage the backlog of customers and shorten waiting times. This increased capacity is expected to be made available from mid-April 2021.

In addition to the increased capacity initiative, the RSA is working to deliver an online driver theory test service. The online service has been trialled on a pilot basis for those taking a theory test for trucks and buses and is now being evaluated with a view to extending the online service type to all test types during 2021.

### **Transport Infrastructure Provision**

256. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Transport if consideration will be given to a scheme encouraging farmers and other rural land owners to cultivate or otherwise encourage a section of road frontage on their lands for pedestrian use in order to facilitate safer passage of those walking or running in the countryside particularly in view of current restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13412/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. While my Department provides grant support to assist local authorities with the maintenance and renewal of regional and local roads, consideration of a scheme to utilize a section of road frontage on private land for pedestrian use would be a matter for each local authority in terms of assessing what would be feasible and what arrangements would have to be made with individual landowners.

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

### **Bus Services**

257. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the supports in place for bus and coach operators (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13413/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Both the National Transport Authority (NTA) and my Department have been engaging directly with commercial bus operators throughout the Covid-19 Emergency. The public transport system in Ireland has played an essential service role over the course of the pandemic, especially in carrying essential workers and others making necessary journeys.

Several targeted Government Decisions made throughout the crisis, in addition to general supports such as the wage subsidy scheme, have provided much needed support to the sector, particularly the decisions to:

- substantially increase the 2020 budget for the existing PSO system;
- introduce temporary financial support for certain licensed services provided by commercial bus operators (CBOs) for an initial period of 6-months;
- provide a higher-than-normal provision for PSO funding in the 2021 budget due to the ongoing impact of Covid-19 on the public transport sector; and
- extend the provision of temporary funding supports for the CBOs for a further 3 months, with the option to extend monthly thereafter subject to engagement with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

Prior to the Covid-19 health emergency, licensed operators operated non-subsidized bus services on a commercial basis. However, due to the impact of Covid-19 on passenger numbers and the associated drop in fare revenue, these services were no longer commercially viable. As such, on the 25th June 2020 Government decided to introduce new temporary financial support for certain licensed services provided by commercial bus operators to ensure the continued operation of these essential services. These temporary supports were initially introduced

for a period of 6-months, with a view to protecting capacity across the public transport sector throughout the crisis. The NTA on behalf of my Department, has entered into contracts with the licensed bus sector to provide funding for routes where a clear public interest justification supports such intervention.

As it remains the case that commercial bus operators are still under severe financial distress due to the fall in passenger numbers and associated drop in fare revenue as a result of Covid-19, on the 26th of January 2021, Government decided to extend the temporary funding supports to the licensed bus sector for a further period of 3 months, with an option to extend contracts on a monthly basis thereafter.

These supports are in addition to the suite of other financial support measures that the Government has introduced to help mitigate the impact of Covid-19, which includes the Wage Subsidy Scheme extended through 2021, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment extended to end June 2021, the COVID-19 Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow.

The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation has also set up an online tool to help support Irish start-ups and SMEs to navigate the range of Government supports and identify which support may be most relevant to their business.

### **Taxi Regulations**

258. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to extend the ten-year rule for taxi drivers with vehicles first registered in 2012 given the severe impact of Covid-19 on the industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13417/21]

**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 independent regulator, 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.

### **Aviation Policy**

259. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport the way in which the recently adopted European Union Aviation Safety Agency rules in relation to flying drones will impact on the older regulations; and if it will be possible to retrospectively classify drones with a CE class mark. [13418/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** The recently adopted EU regulation will fully replace the existing national regulation of drones. Certain transition periods are included within the new EU regulation including the continuing use of drones that do not carry a CE marking.

Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/947 lays down detailed provisions for the operation of unmanned aircraft systems as well as for personnel, including remote pilots and organisations involved in those operations. Regulation (EU) 2019/947 became applicable on 31 December 2020. It allows for a transition period of two years for the phasing in of some

of the technical requirements, such as the design requirements set out in Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2019/945.

Under the EU Regulatory regime, drone operations are categorised under three broad types – Open, Specific and Certified, with different regulatory considerations applied across each operation type. Regulation (EU) 2019/947 sets operational rules that apply to both professional drone operators and those flying drones for leisure. These rules not only address safety but also contain important building blocks to mitigate drone related security risks. At the end of 2020, the Irish Aviation Authority (IAA) launched a new registration system for drone operators to comply with Regulation (EU) 2019/947 which, as of 31 December 2020, requires any drone over 250g or a drone with a camera or sensor to be registered with national authorities. Other mitigation measures such as remote identification and definition of geographical zones are being phased in over the next 2 years (1 January 2022).

The Small Unmanned Aircraft (Drones) and Rockets Order 2015 (SI 563 of 2015) still applies except where replaced by the new EU regulations. (For example the provisions related to rockets and offences still apply).

There is scope within the regulation for drone manufacturers to supply retrofit packages for drones already on the market, bringing the drones to the existing CE class mark. It is unlikely, however, the manufacturers will do this to any great extent.

The use of existing drones that are not CE marked will possibly be extended to 2023 due to delays in the publication of the harmonised standards for applying the CE marking to drones. A decision on this, to be taken at a European level, is expected in mid-2021.

## Rail Network

260. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Transport if he will allow stakeholders such as local representative groups to have an input into both the terms of reference and the liaison with the appointed consultants in relation to the feasibility study for extending the MetroLink to south-west County Dublin in keeping with the Aarhus Convention; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13423/21]

261. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Transport if the feasibility study on extending the MetroLink to south-west County Dublin will focus on a continuation of the link from Beechwood to Knocklyon as opposed to a standalone metro line on the Knocklyon corridor as is proposed in the terms of reference; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13424/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 260 and 261 together.

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 MetroLink.

The Deputy is aware that the study refers to forms part of the statutory review of the *Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area*. An initial public consultation period on the review ended in January and I understand a second public consultation period will be held later in the year.

10 March 2021

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.

### **Rail Network**

262. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Transport if local community groups will be invited to participate in the upcoming strategic rail review; and if an estimated date for the start of this review will be provided. [13451/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I can inform the Deputy that my Department is co-operating with the Department for Infrastructure (Northern Ireland) and other relevant stakeholders in order to develop terms of reference for a strategic rail review of the network on the island of Ireland.

It is certainly my intention that any finalised terms of reference will provide for a public engagement process to allow for groups such as those you mentioned make their views known.

For the Deputy's information, the ambition remains to have the initial phase of work completed to allow for the launch of the tender process by end Q1 and the study to begin in due course.

*Question No. 263 answered with Question No. 229.*

### **Departmental Advertising**

264. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Transport the amount spent across his Department on advertising in relation to Covid-19 by month and by media outlet (details supplied) from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021. [13569/21]

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

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of Transport has worked as part of a cross Government Communications Group on a range of targeted public information campaigns. This group, led by the Department of an Taoiseach, is tasked with providing a co-ordinated and whole of government response to the pandemic and as such, leads on the type of campaign mentioned in the Deputy's Question.

### **Financial Services Regulation**

265. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance if he has engaged with the Central Bank in respect of a fine issued to a broker regarding the breaching of market rules in relation to a transaction; if his attention has been drawn to a case (details supplied); and why the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement is not now investigating following the issuing of a fine against the broker by the Central Bank of Ireland. [13172/21]

291. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance if he has engaged with the Central Bank in respect of a fine issued to a broker regarding the breaching of market rules in relation to a transaction; and if the case has been escalated to the Garda National Economic

Crime Bureau and or Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement. [13170/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 265 and 291 together.

I have outlined on more than one occasion my views and those of Government regarding the expectation that we have in relation to the conduct of the financial services sector and senior people within those organisations that are in a position of trust. The matter is an evolving situation, but at this point I note that a number of significant actions have been taken by the Regulator, by the Board of the NTMA in relation to the State's dealing with the firm in question and I am also aware of actions that the firm has now recently taken.

The Central Bank of Ireland is the independent regulator of financial service providers in Ireland. The importance of an independent regulator is widely recognised. As such they are the ones that determine what measures or actions need to be taken in relation to any potential or actual wrongdoing by regulated financial service providers. This responsibility includes the question of whether to refer any matters to other public authorities that may have a remit to investigate such matters.

Finally, it is also important to underline that Ireland has a robust and comprehensive regulatory regime, operated by an independent regulator, but that my Department continues to keep matters under review in terms of the overall legislative and policy framework. In that context, my Department is in regular contact with the Central Bank of Ireland on such matters.

### **Banking Sector**

266. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the competitive nature of retail banking; his further views on the impact of the closure of a bank and the branches of another bank (details supplied) on banking in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12477/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Government wants to ensure that the banking and financial system is one which will effectively contribute and support economic growth and employment. Competition in the sector is vital to ensure that businesses and consumers have a range of banking options available when using financial services and accessing credit.

The withdrawal of Ulster Bank is regrettable for its customers and staff and is an unfavourable development for competition in the banking market. It is also a reflection of the wider challenges banking is facing, not only in Ireland but also abroad. The impact of Covid-19, coming on top of weak enough economic growth in Europe and America, has already been seen in European banking with consolidation and mergers in other European markets.

In Ireland, our banks were amongst the worst hit by the previous crisis. Since then, overall conditions for banks have been difficult despite Ireland's strong recovery from the previous crisis. These conditions include the long period of low, now negative, interest rates that have severely depressed margins, having to continue to deal with the bad debt legacy of the last crisis, low credit demand, both in mortgages and SME lending and the relatively small size of the Irish market.

In addition, there are major changes driving the consolidation elsewhere. The innovations introduced by fintechs and their increasing market penetration are reducing traffic into the branch networks run by traditional banks. Competing with lean and nimble online firms while

coping with high cost structures is posing a considerable challenge for the traditional full service sector and we are seeing cutbacks in these entities in terms of staff, branches and initiatives to move their customers online.

The announcement by Bank of Ireland last week that it is to close 103 branches in Ireland – 15 of which are in the north - is further evidence of the impact technology is having on banking and the way the public interacts with banks. However, it is accepted that many people will still need or want to carry out their banking activities in person and it is a welcome development that Bank of Ireland is now entering into a new partnership with An Post that will allow personal and business customers to use their local post office for a range of banking services, including cash withdrawal and lodgements.

NatWest is in early stage discussions with PTSB and other strategic banking counterparties about their potential interest in certain retail and SME assets, liabilities and operations. A Memorandum of Understanding which has been signed with AIB regarding certain corporate and commercial loans, signals a potentially important development for the Irish banking sector. While these are primarily commercial negotiations, the Government is supportive of trying to bring about an outcome that is good for both AIB and PTSB, but more importantly for Ulster Bank's customers, staff and the Irish economy generally.

### Value Added Tax

267. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated cost of the standard VAT rate being reduced from 23% to 21% for a six month period from 1 September 2020 to 28 February 2021; if an analysis of this policy decision is being carried out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12512/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The temporary reduction in the standard rate of VAT to 21% announced in the July Stimulus Package was projected to cost €440m.

I am advised by Revenue that it is not yet possible to calculate the actual cost foregone as VAT tax returns, which are usually filed by traders 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 and are sensitive to change due to ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Legislative Measures

268. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Finance if he will introduce legislation to allow banks to differentiate between customers in different sectors specifically to exempt solicitor client accounts from negative interest rate charges; the discussions he has had with the Governor of the Central Bank on the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12525/21]

298. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department had discussions with banks (details supplied) or with the Central Bank regarding their proposals to charge negative interest rates on transaction moneys held by solicitors in clients' accounts; if so, the

result of these discussions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13308/21]

**300. Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that banks (details supplied) have given notice that negative interest rates charges are to apply to moneys held in the solicitors' client accounts; the measures he plans to take regarding same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13333/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 268, 298 and 300 together.

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

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 the main 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.

I have no plans to introduce legislation to allow banks to differentiate between customers in different sectors. Firstly, it does not appear to me to be either fair or equitable to distinguish between different classes of customers with some benefiting from an exemption to negative interest rates and others not benefiting. In addition, the unintended consequences of such a decision need to be considered. Banks are operating in a challenging business and economic environment and may choose not offer services to customers if it is not possible for to pass on some of the costs associated with the delivery of those services to these customers.

### **Banking Sector**

**269. Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance if there is a citation in the relationship framework agreement between the Minister and a bank (details supplied) that prohibits or in any way prevents him from meeting with the bank to discuss and negotiate on a change to that agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12617/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy is aware and as set out in the Relationship Framework for PTSB, due to its systemic importance to the Irish financial system, the bank received significant support from the State in the financial crisis.

This support led to the State becoming the majority shareholder in PTSB with the approval of the European Commission. This approval was subject to the Minister and the Bank entering into the Relationship Framework on terms approved by the European Commission. One of the reasons for this was to ensure that the Minister's shareholding did not result in breaches of competition law rules.

Critically, and as set out in the Relationship Framework, any amendments to, or revocation or replacement of, the Relationship Framework must be made following consultation with PTSB and upon the instruction, or with the agreement, of the European Commission.

As is clearly set out in the Relationship Framework, the board of PTSB has full responsibility and authority for all of the operations of the bank in accordance with its legal, fiduciary, and regulatory obligations. The Relationship Framework further provides for safeguards as to the separate management of each of the State's interests in Irish credit institutions (including in PTSB) in order to ensure that those interests, and the management of those interests, do not lead to a prevention, restriction or distortion of competition in contravention of merger control or competition law rules.

It is therefore the case that any proposed amendment to the Relationship Framework must not only be in accordance with the regulatory requirements under which PTSB operates, the State Agreements referred to in the Relationship Framework and the law, the proposed amendments must also be approved by the European Commission following consultation with PTSB.

## **Banking Sector**

270. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance if there is a citation in the relationship framework agreement between the Minister and a bank (details supplied) that prohibits or in any way prevents him from meeting with the bank to discuss and negotiate on a change to that agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12618/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy is aware and as set out in the Relationship Framework for Bank of Ireland, due to its systemic importance to the Irish financial system, the bank received significant support from the State in the financial crisis.

This support led to the State becoming a significant shareholder in Bank of Ireland with the approval of the European Commission. This approval was subject to the Minister and the Bank entering into the Relationship Framework on terms approved by the European Commission. One of the reasons for this was to ensure that the Minister's shareholding did not result in breaches of competition law rules.

Critically, and as set out in the Relationship Framework, any amendments to, or revocation or replacement of, the Relationship Framework must be made following consultation with Bank of Ireland and upon the instruction, or with the agreement, of the European Commission.

As is clearly set out in the Relationship Framework, the board of Bank of Ireland has full responsibility and authority for all of the operations of the bank in accordance with its legal, fiduciary, and regulatory obligations. The Relationship Framework further provides for safeguards as to the separate management of each of the State's interests in Irish credit institutions in order to ensure that those interests, and the management of those interests, do not lead to a prevention, restriction or distortion of competition in contravention of merger control or competition law rules.

It is therefore the case that any proposed amendment to the Relationship Framework must

not only be in accordance with the regulatory requirements under which Bank of Ireland operates, the State Agreements referred to in the Relationship Framework and the law, the proposed amendments must also be approved by the European Commission following consultation with Bank of Ireland.

### Banking Sector

271. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance the amount forgone to the Exchequer through past losses written-off against future tax liabilities by each of the pillar banks operating in the State (details supplied) from 2016 to 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12619/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy is aware, loss relief for corporation tax is a long-standing feature of the Irish corporate tax system and a standard feature of corporation tax systems in most OECD countries. It recognises the fact that a business cycle runs over several years and that it would be unfair to tax income earned in one year and not allow relief for losses incurred in another. Loss relief works by allowing a deduction for losses incurred in one accounting period against profits earned in another period.

In relation to the Deputy's query, section 851A of the Taxes Consolidation Act, 1997 precludes Revenue officials from directly or indirectly disclosing taxpayer information to third parties unless this is specifically provided for in legislation. Therefore, neither Revenue nor I can comment on the tax affairs of any individual or company. However, as the State is the largest shareholder in PTSB, AIB and Bank of Ireland (owning 75%, 71% and 14% respectively of each bank), the Department of Finance monitors the overall strategic direction of these banks and develops and executes plans to optimise the value of the State's investments.

In addition, Deputies may recall that in 2018, Department of Finance officials produced a detailed technical note for the Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach on the subject of both bank losses and corporation tax losses more generally (see <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/436ff7-technical-note-on-the-potential-consequences-of-changes-to-the-treat/>). It was further updated and re-circulated to members during the 2019 Finance Bill process. Based on the banks' published annual reports, the technical note estimated that the value of tax losses brought forward that were utilised by the State's three banks in 2017, 2018 and 2019 were as shown below. Data for 2016 was not included in the report and the banks' 2020 annual reports have only recently been published and have not yet been analysed by officials.

#### Value of tax losses forward utilised per annual reports

-	2017	2018	2019
AIB	€137m	€114m	€16m
Bank of Ireland (BOI)	€84m*	€91m	€33m
PTSB	€12m	€0m	€6m
Total	€233m	€205m	€55m

The annual reports state that the banks have tax losses in Ireland and the United Kingdom (UK); although the above figures include utilisation of UK losses, they are understood to only represent only a small portion of the total. \*Also, BOI executed an intragroup transaction in 2017 for the purpose of capital optimisation which reduced the quantum of tax losses utilised in the year to €17 million. Accordingly, the amount of tax losses utilised in 2016 of €84 million has been used in the above table as being representative of a more typical year.

It should also be noted that these banks do currently pay Irish corporation tax, as the tax losses do not shelter profits made in all their corporate entities in Ireland. At an Oireachtas committee meeting in 2018, Bank of Ireland indicated that it paid corporation tax of €31 million in Ireland in 2017. AIB also disclosed that it paid €58m in corporation tax in Ireland over the two years 2016/7, which would be an average of €29m each year. According to the banks' 2019 financial statements, Bank of Ireland, AIB and PTSB incurred current year corporation tax charges in Ireland totalling €70 million. These corporation tax payments are in addition to the bank levy, which raised €295 million over the years 2017 to 2019, as shown below.

Bank levy	2017	2018	2019
AIB	€49m	€49m	€35m
BOI	€29m	€29m	€34m
PTSB	€23m	€23m	€24m
Total	€101m	€101m	€93m

### Banking Sector

272. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance the amount forgone to the Exchequer through past losses written-off against future tax liabilities by all companies from 2016 to 2020; the amount written off by company size and by the number of employees, respectively, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12620/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy is aware, loss relief for corporation tax is a long-standing feature of the Irish corporate tax system and a standard feature of corporation tax systems in most OECD countries. It recognises the fact that a business cycle runs over several years and that it would be unfair to tax income earned in one year and not allow relief for losses incurred in another. Loss relief works by allowing a deduction for losses incurred in one accounting period against profits earned in another period.

Each year, Revenue publishes detailed analyses of the previous year's corporation tax returns and payments which includes breakdowns of corporation tax loss relief by sector (available at <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/research/research-reports/corporation-tax-and-international.aspx>). These reports explain that, while a company must record losses claimed on their corporation tax returns, losses can only be used if there is an appropriate corporation tax liability to offset. Also, after the first year of claim, any losses and capital allowances carried forward are combined in tax returns data. Therefore, it is not possible to separately identify capital allowances and losses in the carry forward at aggregate level and the figures below for loss relief include excess capital allowances carried forward.

The amount of loss relief used in all 2016, 2017 and 2018 tax returns is as shown below. These figures include current year losses used in each year (i.e. losses incurred in the current year and offset against other sources of income) in addition to prior-year losses carried forward into that year. Revenue is currently analysing the 2019 corporation tax returns and will publish the results of this analysis later this year (the last of these returns were not due to be filed until September 2020). 2020 corporation tax returns are due to be filed up to September 2021 and Revenue will publish their analysis of these returns in 2022.

Revenue analysis of corporation tax loss relief	2016	2017	2018
Loss relief used	€14.9 bn	€14.4 bn	€13.4 bn

An analysis of loss relief used on the corporation tax returns for 2018 by company size by number of employees is shown in the following table. It should be noted that this data refers to the individual companies claiming the loss relief. Where such companies form part of a larger

corporate group, the overall level of related employment may be significantly larger. Similar analysis is not readily available for earlier years, but I am advised that the distribution is not expected to vary greatly from year to year.

Number of employees	Number of companies availing of loss relief	Estimated loss relief used€ bn
Less than 10	20,733	7.4
11 to 49	4,203	1.8
50 to 249	1,034	1.4
250 or more	235	2.8
Total	26,205	13.4

It should also be noted that the above tables show the amount of loss relief used by companies, but the value of this loss relief depends on whether the losses were incurred in the course of a trade that is taxable at 12.5% or 25%. (The profits of an ‘excepted trade’ are chargeable to corporation tax at the 25% rate. An ‘excepted trade includes’: (i) subject to exclusions, a trade of dealing in or developing land; (ii) a trade involving working scheduled minerals, mineral compounds or mineral substances; and (iii) a trade relating to certain petroleum activities).

I am advised by Revenue that the value of loss relief used for all years up to 2018, the latest year available, is published at <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/tax-expenditures/costs-expenditures.aspx>. This includes the cost associated with current year losses used and the cost of claims by self-employed taxpayers registered for income tax (Revenue advises me that over 90% of the cost shown for 2018 is associated with companies).

### Tax Credits

273. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Finance the amount paid out under the stay and spend scheme; the amount budgeted for the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12654/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The purpose of the Stay and Spend Tax Credit scheme is to provide targeted support to businesses within the hospitality sector whose operations are likely to be most affected by continued restrictions on public health grounds. In order to claim the Stay and Spend Tax Credit, taxpayers are required to upload a copy of their receipt(s) for qualifying expenditure to the Revenue Receipts Tracker and then make a formal claim for the tax credit when submitting their annual Income Tax Return.

To take the second part of the Deputy’s question first, as I indicated on a number of occasions in response to Parliamentary Questions towards the end of last year, when the scheme was announced in late July 2020, it was tentatively estimated that it could involve an Exchequer cost of about €270 million. This was budgeted for over the two years 2021 and 2022 and was based on 2.15 million individual taxpayers fully availing of a tax credit of €125. Also, as was indicated at the time, the measure was introduced in anticipation that the economy would be on the way to being fully open, and there would be mobility across our country. We know now that this has not been the case for much of the period since the commencement of the scheme on 1 October 2020. Public health restrictions have had the effect of impeding the operation of the incentive as originally envisaged.

At the same time, since 1 October 2020, a total of 56,016 receipts have been uploaded to the Revenue Receipts Tracker, as at 4 March 2021. The related expenditure recorded on these receipts amounts to €9,207,244, and the potential tax cost is €1,841,449, assuming all such expenditure is claimed and qualifies in full for tax relief.

With regard to the Deputy's question about the amount paid out under the scheme, Revenue have advised me that when it comes to tax credits, some taxpayers will get refunds whereas some will have the credit to offset against underpayments along with a number of other credits they claim. As at 7 March 2021 a total of 8,995 claims have been included in Income Tax Returns for 2020 for the Stay and Spend credit. These claims relate to €3,206,048 of the qualifying expenditure recorded on the Revenue Receipts Tracker to date and the tax cost of same amounts to some €641,000. However, as the filing deadline for the 2020 Income Tax Return is not until 31 October 2021, information on the total number of claims and cost for the 2020 year of assessment will not be available until after the filing date and the returns have been processed. Subsequent to claims being made in respect of this new scheme and any other relief or deduction, verification of such reliefs and deductions forms part of Revenue's comprehensive risk assessment programme.

Decisions on next steps relating to the scheme have yet to be taken and I will continue to assess matters as circumstances evolve.

### **Tax Reliefs**

274. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Finance if the current rates allowed under the e-working tax relief can be increased given the current shortfall for employees in the difference between the maximum rate of employer allowed working from home allowance before tax is applicable and the e-working tax relief; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12665/21]

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

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

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

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

As I announced on Budget day, in addition to these existing measures, Revenue have agreed to allow broadband to qualify for this relief. This apportionment is based on the number of days the person spent working from home in year with 30% of the apportioned value accepted by Revenue as related to work in the home.

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

Revenue have published detailed guidance on e-working arrangements in their Tax and Duty manual TDM 05-02-13 e-Working and Tax which may be viewed at the following link: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-05/05-02-13.pdf>

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

### **Tax Code**

275. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Finance if the 20% additional tax and duty being placed on raw materials in the production of lubricants which are not the end product itself will be examined (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12670/21]

280. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Finance if he will address the issues raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12738/21]

307. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Finance the reason mineral based lubricants derived from crude oil which are being imported from the UK are subject to mineral oils taxes and carbon duties as if they were fuels or propellants; if he will introduce an immediate derogation from these taxes for traders purchasing lubricants; if so, if this derogation can be applied immediately given this is increasing raw material costs for companies such as a company (details supplied) by 20% and giving its competitors based in Northern Ireland a considerable competitive advantage which could put them out of business; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13473/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 275, 280 and 307 together.

The Deputy will be aware that from 1 January 2021, the UK is a 3rd country for the purposes of trade and movement of goods. This means that a range of customs formalities apply to goods moving to, from or through the United Kingdom, excluding Northern Ireland. Imports of goods from Great Britain must be declared to customs and are liable to customs duty, excise duties and VAT at import, where applicable.

Mineral Oil Tax (MOT) is an excise duty on mineral oils used as fuel in motor vehicles or for heating. There has been no change in the scope of products that are subject to MOT since

1 January 2021. The rate of MOT is composed of a carbon and non-carbon component. The carbon component is also referred to as carbon tax.

I am advised by Revenue that if the lubricants mentioned in the correspondence provided by the Deputy are for purposes other than fuel for motor vehicles or heating, MOT does not apply. As the MOT becomes payable when the Customs declaration is lodged, it is important that the product is correctly classified and that where applicable, the necessary excise and carbon tax exemption codes are entered on the Customs declaration to ensure that excise related duties are not applied to products that are not fuel for motor vehicles or for heating.

I am advised by Revenue that in relation to the business concerned, it is engaging with the business in relation to the classification of products and the procedures for applying excise and carbon tax exemption codes for the products where applicable and that engagement is ongoing.

Further information on the Mineral Oil Carbon Charge is available on Revenue's website at: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/companies-and-charities/excise-and-licences/mineral-oil-tax/carbon-tax/index.aspx>.

### **Banking Sector Data**

276. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the number of retail bank branch closures per year since 2010, disaggregated by bank, year and county location. [12675/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy may be aware, banks are required to notify the Central Bank when they intend to close, merge or move a branch. The Central Bank has informed my officials that its focus regarding branch closures is to ensure that banks adhere to the relevant requirements in the Consumer Protection Code 2012 (the Code) and how banks communicate the closures to their customers.

Banks must ensure that they communicate in a clear and timely way with customers regarding any such changes, including the closure of branches, and in particular inform them about any alternative channels available to them to avail of banking services. Banks must also provide affected vulnerable customers with the assistance necessary to ensure that those customers can retain full access to basic financial services, albeit in many cases at another branch location.

The Code sets out important requirements to ensure that consumers are fully informed of any closures or changes in services, and have time to make alternative arrangements. Under the Code, any bank that intends to close, merge or move a branch must:

- notify the Central Bank immediately;
- provide at least two months' notice to affected consumers to enable them to make alternative arrangements;
- ensure all business of the branch is properly completed prior to its closure, merger or move, or alternatively inform the consumer of how continuity of service will be provided; and
- notify the wider community of the closure, merger or move in the local press in advance.

When notification is received in accordance with Provision 3.12, the Central Bank engages with the banks to ensure the impact of the decision has been carefully considered across its full customer base and at the appropriate levels. The bank must ensure that its communications to customers are clear and transparent and that it seeks to assist vulnerable customers to mitigate the effect of the branch closure as much as possible.

While decisions relating to the business model of regulated firms are commercial matters for the boards of those firms, the Central Bank expects them to take a consumer-focused approach in respect of any decision that affects their customers. Any decision by a board to close bank branches must be supported by an analysis and understanding of the impact the decision will have across its customer base.

I am advised by the Central Bank that there is no requirement for it to maintain a register of branch closures per year or by county. Accordingly, it does not have a breakdown by county location but it has sourced the following information.

#### **Data on Branch Closures 2010 – 2020**

The below table provides the total number of branches closed permanently each year by the five main retail banks from 2010 to 2020 inclusive. It is important to note that this data does not include any branches that were closed in this time period, by banks who have exited the market.

Year	Branch closures by the five main retail banks*
2010	13
2011	8
2012	76
2013	45
2014	14
2015	17
2016	1
2017	24
2018	3
2019	8
2020	13
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>222</b>

\*Note: The figures were provided by the five main retail banks (AIB Group, BOI, KBC, PTSB, Ulster Bank) in March 2021 and include, for example, branch mergers, closure of sub offices and closure of other locations when a tender matured. The figures have been aggregated as the Central Bank is not in a position to share individual firm specific information obtained during the course of supervision, due to supervisory confidentiality requirements.

#### **Tax Yield**

277. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated revenue from tapering out the personal, PAYE and earned income credit of a taxpayer unit by 3% per €1,500 on a person's income between €110,000 and €160,000+ per year resulting in no entitlement to these tax credits when income is in excess of €160,000+ in addition to a USC rate of 3.25% in excess of €190,000. [12707/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The tapering out of tax credits on income above €110,000, at a rate of 3% per €1,500 of income, such that the taxpayer has no entitlement to credits at an income level of about €160,000, combined with the introduction of an additional USC rate of 3.25% on income in excess of €190,000, would yield an estimated €530m and €660m on a first and full year basis respectively.

These calculations are on a taxpayer unit basis, where jointly assessed couples are com-

bined as one tax unit. The figures are estimates for 2021, based on data for the latest year available (2018 currently) adjusted to account for employment and income changes in the interim. Figures are provisional and may be revised. Finally, I have been advised by Revenue that the introduction of credit tapering would involve significant change to operational systems and processes, which would require further evaluation to fully understand the potential impacts on the relative position of different types of income earners.

### Tobacco Smuggling

278. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Finance the number of persons successfully prosecuted for either tobacco or cigarette smuggling in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [12725/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that the number of persons successfully prosecuted for cigarette or tobacco smuggling in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021 is set out in the table below. The number of persons successfully prosecuted for other cigarette or tobacco-related offences, including the sale and supply of illicit tobacco products is also shown.

-	Cigarette/tobacco smuggling		Other cigarette/tobacco-related offences	
Year	Indictable	Summary	Indictable	Summary
2019	1	6	3	52
2020	3	4	9	37
2021 to date	0	1	0	0

I am advised by Revenue that it uses a range of measures designed to identify and target the smuggling, supply or sale of illicit tobacco products, with a view to disrupting the supply chain, seizing the products and, where possible, prosecuting those involved. Revenue's strategy involves developing and sharing intelligence on a national, EU and international basis, the use of analytics and detection technologies and ensuring the optimum deployment of resources on a risk-focused basis.

### Euro Coins Production

279. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Finance if he has considered placing Irish animals on the Irish euro coins; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12736/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The role of the Minister of Finance is to authorise the issuance of circulating and commemorative coins. The Central Bank of Ireland acts as an agent for the Minister in issuing all Irish coin, both circulating and commemorative. The Central Bank has responsibility for the design, production and issuance of euro coins.

Under European guidelines, euro coins have a common obverse side and individual countries in the Eurosystem are not permitted to change the obverse side of a euro coin.

The design on the reverse side of the Irish euro coin is the harp, which is a symbol synonymous with Ireland and has been always depicted on Irish coins. Accordingly, the Minister is not considering replacing the harp with Irish animals on the Irish euro coins.

Over the years, the commemorative coin programme has celebrated a wide variety of themes, including animals and wildlife. Between 2010 and 2012, the Central Bank issued three silver proof coins to honour the Percy Metcalfe designs of the first coins of the Irish Free State.

These coins commemorated the images of the horse, the salmon and the Irish Wolfhound. The theme of the Annual Mint Set to be issued 2021 is 'The Irish Honey Bee' and its role within the environment.

The Central Bank is seeking submissions from the public, until Friday 12 March 2021, in relation to the collector coin programme for 2022. All submissions, including any submission relating to the inclusion of Irish animals on our coin, will be considered as part of the commemorative coin programme.

The Collector Coin Unit at the Central Bank can be contacted directly at [coindesign@centralbank.ie](mailto:coindesign@centralbank.ie).

*Question No. 280 answered with Question No. 275.*

### **Help-To-Buy Scheme**

281. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Finance if the help-to-buy scheme will be extended given that the private construction sector has been restricted due to the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12783/21]

**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.

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.

### **Credit Unions**

282. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Finance the process by which credit union members can call an annual general meeting; and if the process was affected by the Finance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2020. [12787/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Credit Union Act 1997 does not include any provision for credit union members to call an annual general meeting.

Section 78(2) of the Credit Union Act 1997 provides that the annual general meeting of a credit union in respect of any financial year to 30 September shall be held in the October, November, December or January following the end of that financial year. Section 78(3) provides that the Central Bank can convene an annual general meeting if the credit union itself has failed to do so.

The Finance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2020 provides that the annual general meeting of a credit union for the financial year ended September 2020 may be held at any time during the interim period, which is set to expire on 30 April 2021. The interim period is extendable on the basis set out in the 2020 Act.

### Credit Unions

283. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Finance the length of time that may lapse between annual general meetings before the board of a credit union is under an obligation to convene such a meeting; and if the matter was affected by the Finance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2020 or any Covid-19 measures related legislation. [12788/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Section 78(2) of the Credit Union Act 1997 provides that the annual general meeting of a credit union in respect of any financial year to 30 September shall be held in the October, November, December or January following the end of that financial year.

The Finance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2020 provides that the annual general meeting of a credit union for the financial year ended September 2020 may be held at any time during the interim period, which is set to expire on 30 April 2021. The interim period is extendable on the basis set out in the 2020 Act.

Under normal circumstances, the maximum length of time that may lapse between annual general meetings is therefore 16 months. However, in respect of the financial year end 30 September 2020 only, given the extended time provided by which credit unions must hold their AGMs under the 2020 amendments, the maximum period of time that may lapse between the AGM for 2020 and the previous AGM (i.e. the AGM held in respect of the financial year end 30 September 2019) is 19 months.

### Wage Subsidy Scheme

284. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated amount spent on the EWSS for the childcare sector on a monthly basis since it was introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12820/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Deputy will be aware that Section 28B of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 provides for the operation of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), which is an economy-wide enterprise support for eligible businesses in respect of eligible employees. It provides a flat-rate subsidy to qualifying employers based on the numbers of paid and eligible employees on the employer's payroll and charges a reduced rate of employer PRSI of 0.5% on wages paid which are eligible for the subsidy payment.

While the criteria for eligibility for business in general is based on a reduction in turnover as a result of the pandemic, childcare businesses in possession of tax clearance and registered in accordance with Section 58C of the Childcare Act 1991 are eligible for the EWSS.

The following table provides details of the amounts of EWSS paid per month to such businesses, rounded to the nearest €m:

Period	€m
July/August 2020	1
September 2020	19
October 2020	29
November 2020	31
December 2020	32
January 2021	32
February 2021	28
Total	172

### Help-To-Buy Scheme

285. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Finance the number of successful applicants who have applied in each year of the operation of the help-to-buy scheme. [12887/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Help to Buy (HTB) incentive was introduced in 2017. The measure is scheduled to expire on 31 December 2021.

Revenue provide monthly and annual statistics on the scheme (available at: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/tax-expenditures/index.aspx>)

The following table summarises approved claims for each year since the inception of the scheme until end 2020 (the latest date for which data are available).

2017	2018	2019	2020
4812*	4957	6713	6227

\* The 2017 figure includes approved retrospective claims made in 2017 in respect of the period 19 July 2016 to end 2016, as provided for in the relevant legislation.

### Departmental Internships

286. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Finance the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under his aegis in 2019; the cost in terms of wages and allowances; and the estimated numerical capacity of State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis. [12954/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** There are 17 bodies under the aegis of my Department, 8 of which facilitated student work experience or internships in 2019.

The Central Bank provided 90 student placements for work experience and internships, with a total wage cost of €618,000. It estimates capacity for 78 such placements on an annual basis. In addition, the Central Bank also facilitates unpaid transition year work placements.

Two students undertook internships with the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council in 2019, with an associated wage cost of €6,359. Two internship opportunities are offered annually at the Fiscal Council.

Collectively, the National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA), the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA), Home Building Finance Ireland (HBFI) and the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) facilitated paid work experience for 9 students in 2019. The total

cost of €41,078 was borne by the NTMA. It is anticipated that these placements will be advertised on an annual basis.

The Office of the Comptroller & Auditor General engaged 10 University students during 2019 on a nine-month work placement forming part of a degree course at a gross cost of €149,074. The Office examines its capacity and options annually to maximise the potential opportunities to provide work experience and internships and on average can absorb 9 to 13 placements annually.

In 2019, Revenue had a total of 12 college student interns who were engaged in work across specialist fields such as Economic Research and Information and Communications Technology. The total cost of these internships was €169,251.57. Revenue typically provides approximately 15 internships each year.

### **Banking Sector**

287. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the announcement by a bank (details supplied) that it will close 103 branches including a significant number of rural branches, such as the Dunleer branch in County Louth; his plans to encourage the bank to defer closures until such time that the country is exiting the Covid-19 pandemic to ensure persons in more isolated areas have banking supports to hand; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13062/21]

308. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Finance the engagement that has taken place with his Department and officials in the Central Bank following the decision of a bank (details supplied) to close 88 branches in Ireland; if he or the Central Bank officials plan to meet with senior management of the bank to discuss these closures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13519/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 287 and 308 together.

As the Deputy may be aware, as Minister for Finance, I have no role in the commercial decisions made by any bank in the State. This includes banks in which the State has a shareholding.

Decisions in this regard, including the management of branch networks, 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 Bank of Ireland Relationship Framework can be found at the following link:

**BOI:** <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/fc36e6-bank-of-ireland-relationship-framework-march-2012/>

Notwithstanding this, Bank of Ireland provided me with a briefing in advance which was consistent with its announcement on the matter on 1 March.

Some of the key points contained in the announcement are:

- The decision to close these branches is in response to changing customer behaviour with a significant acceleration in digital banking.

- The branches closing are predominately self-service locations which do not offer a counter service.

- To preserve local access to physical banking for those who want it, the bank has agreed a new partnership with An Post which will allow personal and business customers use their local post office for a range of banking services – including to withdraw cash and make cash and cheque lodgements – at no additional cost. The closing Bank of Ireland branches all have a post office within, on average, less than 500 meters.

- The bank confirmed that the new partnership with An Post will be available to all Bank of Ireland customers before any branch closes.

- Furthermore, the bank stated that there will be no closures for six months.

On staff, the bank commented that it will be working closely with all colleagues at these branches and will be setting out a range of options which include relocating to a different branch, moving to a new role in the bank, or voluntary redundancy for those who choose it.

The full Bank of Ireland announcement on the matter can be found at the following link:

<https://www.bankofireland.com/about-bank-of-ireland/press-releases/2021/bank-of-ireland-announces-significant-changes-to-branch-network-and-local-banking-services/>

### **Wage Subsidy Scheme**

288. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Finance if he will extend the employment wage subsidy scheme extension to the end of 2021 for the tourism and aviation sectors which are both unlikely to see a substantial recovery in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13123/21]

297. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Finance his views on extending the employment wage subsidy scheme until the end of 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13239/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 288 and 297 together.

I am aware of the particular concerns and issues that arise for the aviation and tourism sectors arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the reality is that our whole economy and labour market have been rapidly transformed by this unprecedented shock and nearly all sectors have been negatively impacted either directly or indirectly.

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 €2.2 billion have been made and PRSI relief worth over €378m granted to over 47,600 employers in respect of over 537,100 employees.

I have been clear that there will be no cliff-edge to the EWSS. It is likely that continued support will be necessary out to the end of 2021 to help maintain viable businesses and employment and to provide businesses with certainty to the maximum extent possible. Decisions on the form of such support will take account of emerging circumstances and economic conditions.

As the Deputies will be aware from announcements made on Tuesday 23 February, it has been decided that the scheme is now to be extended until the end of June 2021.

With the agreement by Government on the revised plan, COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead, a cautious and measured approach will be taken as we lay the foundations for the full recovery of social life, public services and the economy. It is therefore appropriate that a key business support such as the EWSS should remain in place at current levels of subsidy until the end of the second quarter of 2021.

As the revised plan is implemented, the scheme will play an important role in getting people back to work as public health restrictions are eased, thereby reducing the numbers dependant on social welfare payments over time, including the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP).

For those businesses who may need additional support at this time, I would draw attention to the comprehensive package of other business and employer supports that have been made available since the July Stimulus Plan and Budget 2021 - including the Covid Restriction Support Scheme (CRSS), the Credit Guarantee Scheme, the SBCI Working Capital Scheme, Sustaining Enterprise Fund, and the Covid-19 Business Loans Scheme.

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

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

289. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Finance if he will engage with the pillar banks to ensure that concession-based moratoriums are being provided to tourism businesses until such time as Covid-19 restrictions are lifted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13124/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy will be aware, on 18 March 2020, the Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland (BPF) announced a coordinated approach by banks and other lenders to help their customers, including those in the tourism industry, 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.

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 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% were receiving other supports from lenders.

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 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 regula-

tions. 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.

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.

### **Value Added Tax**

290. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider retaining the tourism VAT rate at 9% until at least 2025 to assist the recovery of the tourism sector post Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13125/21]

295. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to retain the 9% tourism VAT rate until 2025; his views on the way this would assist the recovery of the hospitality and hotel industry; his views on whether such a commitment must be made without delay as tourism contracting has commenced for 2022 and 2023; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13236/21]

305. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider extending the hospitality VAT rate of 9% until 2025; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13428/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 290, 295 and 305 together.

Deputies will be aware that in recognition of the unprecedented challenges facing the Hospitality and Tourism sector, I provided for a reduction in the VAT rate to supplies of certain goods and services which primarily relate to the hospitality and tourism sector in Budget 2021. The rate was reduced from 13.5% to 9% from 1 November 2020 to 31 December 2021.

These changes introduced in the context of the pandemic are kept under review by my Department. Separately, tax changes are generally taken in the context of the Budget. Deputies will be aware that my officials prepare a series of papers containing tax options for the Tax Strategy Group to be considered in the context of the Budgetary process, alongside a wide range of submissions from various stakeholders and lobby groups.

*Question No. 291 answered with Question No. 265.*

### **Legislative Measures**

292. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to defects in sections of the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman Act 2017 whereby banks can initiate proceedings to avoid adjudication in defects in their treatment of a customer; and if there are plans to consult the Ombudsman regarding the need to amend the Act to make it more fit for purpose in this respect or in other respects. [13186/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO) is independent in the performance of his statutory functions. I have no role in the day to day workings of the office or in the decisions which he takes.

One of the main roles of the Ombudsman is to investigate, mediate and adjudicate complaints about the conduct of financial or pension service providers. The Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman was established on 1 January 2018, by the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman Act 2017 ('the Act'). The Act outlines the functions of the FSPO in the investigation of complaints against financial service providers and pension providers.

Section 44(2)(a)(i) of the Act prescribes that

*“a complainant may not make a complaint...where – the conduct giving rise to the complaint is or has been the subject of legal proceedings before a Court or Tribunal .”*

This position is however, counterbalanced by the provisions of Section 50(1) which provides that:

*“Notwithstanding Section 44(2)(a)(i) the Ombudsman may accept a complaint against a financial service provider or a pension provider that has initiated legal proceedings in relation to a matter to which the complaint relates, where the Ombudsman believes, based on reasonable grounds, that the financial service provider or the pension provider, as the case may be, has begun those proceedings in order to prevent the making of the complaint, or to frustrate or delay its investigation.”*

The provisions of Section 50(3)(b) are also relevant, as these prescribe that

*“The Ombudsman shall not investigate or make a decision on a complaint where... there are or have been proceedings (other than where the proceedings have been stayed under Section 49) before any Court in respect of the matter that is the subject of the investigation.”*

Section 49 makes clear that where one of the parties to a complaint before the Ombudsman subsequently commences proceedings in any Court, then any party to those proceedings may apply to the Court for an Order to formally *stay* the proceedings. It is a matter for the Court to make an order pursuant to Section 49 if it is satisfied that:-

*“(i) there is no sufficient reason why the matter in respect of which the proceedings have been commenced, should not be investigated by the Ombudsman, and*

*(ii) the party that commenced the proceedings was at the time when the proceedings were commenced and still remains ready and willing to do all things necessary for the proper conduct of the investigation.*

It is also notable that pursuant to Section 52 of the FSPO Act 2017:

*“The Ombudsman may decline to investigate or may discontinue an investigation of, a complaint where in the opinion of the Ombudsman ... the subject matter of the complaint is of such a degree of complexity that the Courts are a more appropriate forum.”*

The Ombudsman has informed me that these counterbalancing provisions within the governing legislation, recognise the statutory functions of the FSPO to impartially investigate complaints against financial service providers and pension providers, against the background of the overarching jurisdiction of the Courts. Together these statutory provisions ensure that any issues to be determined between a financial service provider and its customer, can be determined by one forum, being the one more suitable to the particular circumstances.

### Economic Data

293. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Finance the breakdown of individual consumption per capita across Ireland’s NUTS III regions from 2008 to date. [13188/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Data for individual consumption per capita across Ireland’s NUTS III regions are not currently available. Overall, personal consumption per capita in 2020 was €20,593 (in current market prices). In 2019, there had been a recovery of approximately 24 per cent since the trough of per capita consumption in 2011. This has been followed by a fall of 9 per cent in 2020 due to the Covid-19 crisis. (Table 1 in link)

However, data are available for disposable income per capita across Ireland’s NUTS III regions from 2009 to 2018 as per table 2. (Table 2 in link)

[<a href=“https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-10\_pq293-10-03-21\_en.docx “>Tables</a>]

### Customs and Excise

294. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Finance the amount of the UK to Ireland customs documentation that is handled electronically arising from the EU-UK free trade agreement; the amount handled by way of the presentation or use of paper documentation; if paper documentation is used, when is it planned to migrate to a purely electronic system of customs controls and checks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13214/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that Ireland’s customs import declaration system, Automated Import System (AIS) which was introduced in November 2020 and Ireland’s Automated Entry Processing (AEP) which processes both import and export declarations, use electronic data processing for managing customs declarations. In that regard, the customs import and export documentation required arising from the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement is managed electronically.

There are some other customs procedures that are scheduled for development over the next four years in line with the EU Commission development schedule which currently require a declarant to present paper-based declarations to Revenue e.g. using an ATA Carnet for the temporary admission of goods to Ireland. An ATA Carnet is an international document that cannot be submitted electronically, as yet, and must be presented to Customs to be stamped and validated. The volume of these declarations is very low.

There are also some occasions where there is a requirement for original supporting documentation to be authenticated by Revenue as part of an import or export e.g. an original certificate of origin. In these cases, the physical document may be requested. Again however, the volumes are very low.

*Question No. 295 answered with Question No. 290.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

296. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Finance his views on increasing the Covid restriction support scheme for businesses with a 75% drop in revenue; his views on the way the hotel industry estimates that 44% of hotel bedroom stock is excluded from the scheme entirely; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13238/21]

303. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will increase the rate of the Covid restrictions support scheme and extend it until the end of 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13419/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 296 and 303 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.

Domestic travel restrictions or social distancing measures are not the level of restrictions to which the CRSS refers. To be eligible to make a claim under the CRSS, the applicable restrictions must require the business to either prohibit, or significantly restrict, customers from accessing the business premises in which the relevant business activity is carried on.

In relation to the eligibility of hotels to claim under the CRSS, I understand the Deputy is referring to a statistic that was included in a media statement made by the Irish Hotels Federation on 11 December 2020. At that time, public health restrictions had been eased, with a phased move to a revised Level 3 restrictions applying nationally, which meant that hotels were allowed to reopen to provide accommodation services to the general public. Gyms, lei-

sure centres and swimming pools, including those within hotels, were also allowed to reopen for individual use. Where, on the relaxation of restrictions, a hotel ceased to be substantially restricted, and therefore ceased to be eligible to claim under the CRSS, it could claim an additional week's support under the scheme (referred to as a 'restart week') to assist it with the costs of reopening at that time.

Since 24 December 2020 hotels have, under public health regulations, been required to close to the public (other than for guests who had a booking and were due to check in up to and including 26 December 2020), with limited opening allowed only for essential non-social and non-tourist purposes. Therefore, hotels are currently eligible to make a claim under the CRSS because public health restrictions are in place which require the business to either prohibit, or significantly restrict, customers from accessing their business premises.

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

The legislation provides that the Scheme will run to 31 March 2021 but may be extended by Ministerial Order (subject to Dáil approval) but not later than 31 December 2021.

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.

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.

*Question No. 297 answered with Question No. 288.*

*Question No. 298 answered with Question No. 268.*

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

299. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider lifting the four-year rule for recoupment of overpayment or refunds for a short period during the Covid-19 pandemic to allow struggling businesses claim back refunds beyond this period; and

if he will make a statement on the matter. [13329/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that the time limit for making refunds of overpaid tax is set out in section 865 Taxes Consolidation Act 1997. There have been numerous decisions of the Tax Appeals Commission which state that the Revenue Commissioners have no discretion to repay tax if a claim has been received from a taxpayer outside the four-year statutory period.

Although the “four year limit” has not been relaxed, the Government has put a range of tax based measures in place to help businesses who are experiencing difficulties during the pandemic. Revenue has been assisting such businesses by implementing measures including the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), Debt Warehousing for VAT, PAYE (Employer), Income Tax and excess TWSS liabilities, reduced interest rates for debts subject to phased payment arrangements, suspension of the surcharge for late filing of Corporation Tax returns and iXBRL financial accounts, and not restricting certain reliefs where returns are filed late due to the impact of COVID-19.

*Question No. 300 answered with Question No. 268.*

### **Community Banking**

301. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance the details of the recommendations from the 2019 report by a company (details supplied) on community banking that have been implemented; his plans to implement other recommendations made by the report in future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13352/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy is aware, Indecon submitted their report on Evaluation of Concept of Community Banking in Ireland to the Department of Finance in late 2019. The report was sent to Government and published in December 2019.

The report contained 15 recommendations, grouped under the following subject areas:

- Leveraging role of state supports for SMEs infrastructure to address market gaps;
- Reducing financial exclusions and managing of existing information by credit unions, An Post and local authorities;
- Enhancing competition;
- Reducing information asymmetries and building skills; and
- Enhanced responsibility for commercial banks.

These recommendations are listed below and were a matter for a range of Departments and Agencies. The Deputy should note that Recommendations 9 and 11 matters for my Department. Following publication, I circulated the report directly to the relevant Ministers and Agencies and asked them to consider the recommendations relevant to their organisation. Any subsequent implementation would be a matter for said Departments and Agencies, based on their own considerations and who will be able to supply further information if required by the Deputy.

Recommendation 1: “Continue to target rural enterprise support in future counter-guarantee

loan schemes.”

The Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) operates a number of schemes on behalf of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

I am informed by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment that the COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme is the largest loan guarantee scheme in the history of the State. The Scheme provides €2 billion in lending, for terms up to five-and-a-half years and offers a range of lending products between €10,000 and €1 million at below market interest rates and is available to SMEs and small mid-caps (business with less than 500 employees). The scheme, which was developed under European Commission’s Temporary State-Aid Framework enabled the inclusion of primary producers.

The Future Growth Loan Scheme makes up to €800m in lending available to SMEs and small mid-caps. Like the COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme, the Future Growth Loan Scheme is available to businesses engaged in primary agriculture and aquaculture (the farming and seafood sectors), supporting businesses in these sectors as they seek financing for long-term investment.

Recommendation 2: “Expand Microfinance Ireland’s mandate to provide enterprise loans of up to €50,000.”

I am informed by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment that Microfinance Ireland provides vital support to microenterprises by filling the lending gap in the market by lending to business that cannot obtain loans from other commercial lenders. It lends to business that do not meet the conventional risk criteria applied by commercial lenders and applies interest rate charges for its lending which are not reflective of its credit risk.

With the arrival of COVID-19 in Ireland and the subsequent impact on businesses across the country, as an emergency measure Microfinance Ireland introduced the COVID-19 Loan Scheme to provide support to microenterprises directly impacted by the effects of the virus. Phase 1 of the scheme had significant demand with the equivalent of three years lending provided in a four-month period. Phase 2 of the scheme commenced in August 2020 and MFI customers can apply for a COVID-19 Business Loan up to €25,000 in addition to their existing borrowings, subject to a maximum credit exposure of €50,000.

The Department Enterprise, Trade and Employment has assured me that it will continue to work with MFI to provide appropriate loans to microenterprises.

Recommendation 3: “Promotion by Local Enterprise Offices of Micro Enterprise Loan Fund.”

Local Enterprise Offices are bodies under the aegis of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. I am informed by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment that the LEOs actively work with MicroFinance Ireland to promote their loan fund. The LEOs submitted 751 loan applications to Micro Finance Ireland in 2020. The LEOs have a provisional target to submit 550 loan applications to Micro Finance Ireland in 2021.

Recommendation 4: “Set ambitious targets for regional impact of any revised Brexit loan scheme.”

I am informed by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine that while there are currently no regional targets for the Brexit Loan Scheme, analysis of applications indicates a good geographical spread of beneficiaries.

10 March 2021

I am informed by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment that work is under way to scope potential options for adjustments/revisions to the Brexit Loan Scheme, however given the structure of the scheme, which is counter-guaranteed by the European Investment Fund through its InnovFin SME guarantee facility, there may be limitations on the extent of any alterations to the scheme.

Any revised Brexit Loan Scheme will be promoted across the regions.

Recommendation 5: “Consider new initiatives to support expansion of SME lending by newer platforms.”

The Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) significantly expanded the number of on-lenders offering SBCI products over the course of 2020. The participation of non-bank credit providers (3 signed, 3 to sign in near future) and the inclusion of 19 Credit unions in the COVID-19 Credit Guarantee scheme (CCGS) has significantly broadened the access to guarantee schemes both by type of institution and by geographic spread, and has increased access to the target audience considerably.

The inclusion of non-bank finance providers has allowed SBCI products be delivered via new lending platforms and has brought competition and choice to the market.

SBCI also increased the number of on-lenders participating in delivering the Future Growth loan Scheme (FGLS) by two, increasing the number to six participating institutions. SBCI also has a permanent open call on its website for interested on-lenders to apply for liquidity facilities to help increase price competition and customer choice.

Recommendation 6: “Expansion of Personal Micro Credit Scheme by member-owned credit unions.”

This is a policy matter for the Minister for Social Protection.

I understand that the Personal Micro Credit Scheme (PMC) provides for small scale loans, known as “It Makes Sense” loans, ranging from €100 to €2,000, by Credit Unions to borrowers in receipt of social welfare payments who may have difficulty accessing low cost credit. Currently 107 credit unions at some 281 locations are participating in the Scheme.

An Post facilitates the repayment of these loans for social welfare recipients who receive their payment through a Post Office, by utilising the Department of Social Protection’s Household Budgeting Facility. As part of a pilot scheme since Q1 2020, the Department of Social Protection has funded the weekly administrative cost for access to the Household Budgeting Facility.

Recommendation 7: “Facilitation of new providers to enhance access to credit in communities.”

This recommendation focusses on potential for the An Post or other community-based providers to increase access to credit.

My role in relation to the provision of financial services specifically by the post office network relates primarily to payment services, for which I as the Minister for Finance authorise An Post to provide. This authorisation is under the Postal and Telecommunications Services Act 1983 (Section 67) Order 2016.

For all other matters related to the post office network, I defer to the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communication, Mr Eamon Ryan, TD. An Post is a body under the aegis

of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications.

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

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.

Initiatives by the SBCI are outlined above under Recommendation 5. SBCI is currently exploring a number of new initiatives in partnership with both existing and new on-lenders that will further increase the level of competition and choice in the market, particularly in relation to emerging opportunities associated with the Green agenda and energy efficiency.

Recommendation 8: “Development of initiatives by local authorities as part of digital strategies to assist individuals to apply online for banking services.”

Policy on local authorities is the responsibility of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Recommendation 9: “Support the Credit Union Market to deliver Expanded Range of Community Banking Services.”

Credit Union policy is a responsibility under my Department. Revised Central Bank lending regulations were enacted on 1 January 2020 which materially expanded the lending capacity of the sector, including for mortgage and SME lending. The sector had a combined mortgage and SME loan book of €344 million at end 2020. More recently, I welcomed the announcement that nineteen credit unions have been approved to participate in the COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme (CGS).

The Government is supportive of credit unions who have the financial strength, the competence and the capability, undertaking more SME and mortgage lending. However, the decision to lend is to be made by the board of each individual credit union, taking into account their own specific commercial, risk appetite and regulatory factors.

I am also aware that many credit unions have improved their digital offerings. In 2016, the Central Bank defined and described a suite of additional services known as MPCAS, under which approved credit unions may offer personal current accounts with debit cards, overdrafts and a wide range of payment services within an appropriate risk framework. To date, 54 credit unions have been approved to provide MPCAS.

I am also aware of a number of collaborative projects underway to support finance for retrofitting and agri-lending, as well as collaborative projects being developed in the areas of SME lending, insurance and investment in social housing. These are all positive examples of how many credit unions are widening their products and services for their members.

It should also be noted that the Government has committed to a review of the policy framework for credit unions in the Programme for Government. This project is already well advanced.

Recommendation 10: “An Post to explore and discuss with its parent Government Department, NewEra, and, where appropriate, the Department of Finance, the possibility of investing in partner financial organisations, where such investment is commercially viable and where it would enhance competition in lending market.”

Please see information provided on Recommendation 7.

Recommendation 11: “Extend Exemption for New Community Banking Entrants from Notification of Charges for 5 Years.”

This recommendation is still under consideration by officials in my Department. Indecon accepted that the current 3 year exemption is not a major barrier. The extent of any additional attraction for new community banking entrants is limited and has to be balanced against the potential impact on consumers dealing with such new entrants.

Recommendation 12: “Development of Technology Based Lending Tool Kit by Enterprise Ireland and Local Enterprise Offices.”

Please see information provided on Recommendation 13.

Recommendation 13: “Advisory supports by Local Enterprise Offices to include assistance with preparation of lending applications.”

Enterprise Ireland and Local Enterprise Offices are bodies under the aegis of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. I am informed by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment that The LEOs offer financial mentoring which helps firms with the preparation of lending applications. The LEOs also offer financial training which upskills small business owners and managers to be in a position to prepare their own loan applications.

Recommendation 14: “Skillnet Ireland to offer analysis of lending requirements as a component in their Management Development Programmes.”

Skillnet Ireland is a State agency under the aegis of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

Recommendation 15: “Commercial Banks should consider the establishment of an increased number of Community Banking Hubs or provide alternative methods of banking services delivery in areas where branch closures may have hindered access to banks.”

This recommendation is a matter for the commercial banks and the Deputy will be aware that decisions in regards to operational matters are the sole responsibility of the boards and management of the individual banks which are run on an independent and commercial basis. Furthermore, 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 are publicly available and were insisted upon by the European Commission to protect competition in the Irish market.

However, I am advised that the Central Bank’s Consumer Protection Code 2012 (the Code) states that a bank must not, through its policies, procedures, or working practice, prevent access to basic financial services. The Central Bank adopts a ‘technology neutral’ approach meaning that the same principles of regulation, including the rules of the Code, apply equally to both digital and traditional delivery environments.

Branch closures are always a matter of regret, and I as Minister, would hope that closures are kept to the minimum necessary for financial sustainability. Where there are branch closures,

the Central Bank's Consumer Protection Code must be complied with. Requirements include immediate notification to the Central Bank, at least two months notice to affected consumers and either ensuring all branch business is properly completed prior to closure or informing as to how continuity of service will be provided. Notwithstanding this, I do expect that any bank closing branches will do everything it can to mitigate the impacts of the branch closures on local communities, including technology and the use of alternative means of service delivery. In this regard, I note Bank of Ireland has agreed a new partnership with An Post which will allow personal and business customers use their local post office for a range of banking services – including to withdraw cash and make cash and cheque lodgements – at no additional cost.

### **Value Added Tax**

302. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Finance if there are circumstances under which VAT can be charged on medical tests used to diagnose and for treatment of cancer; the specific circumstances under which VAT can be charged on such tests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13383/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that the VAT rating of goods and services is subject to the requirements of EU VAT law with which Irish VAT law must comply. In accordance with the Directive our legislation exempts from VAT hospital and medical care or treatment provided by a hospital, nursing home, clinic or similar establishment, which includes medical tests used to diagnose and treat cancer. The legislation further provides that professional medical care services recognised as such by the Department of Health are exempt from VAT. This means that all medical tests used to diagnose and treat cancer which are provided by a recognised medical professional are exempt from VAT.

*Question No. 303 answered with Question No. 296.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

304. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will adopt a standard position on a moratorium for loan repayments for the hospitality sector to reflect the extended Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13421/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy will be aware, on 18 March 2020, the Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland (BPF) announced a coordinated approach by banks and other lenders to help their customers, including those in the hospitality sector, 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.

Borrowers whose payment break has ended have 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 BPF reported, that as of 31 December 2020, approximately 49% of SMEs returned to repaying on the existing term whilst 46% returned to repaying on extended term basis and just over 5% were receiving other supports from lenders.

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 BPFII 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.

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.

*Question No. 305 answered with Question No. 290.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

**306. Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider extending the current tax warehoused at 0% from 12 months to an additional 48 months given that some businesses have remained closed throughout the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13433/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that the current tax warehousing schemes allow for the deferral of collection of certain tax liabilities relating to "Period 1", the "Covid-19 restricted trading period". The tax liabilities that may be deferred or "warehoused" are VAT, PAYE (Employer) liabilities, excess Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) payments due to be refunded to Revenue by employers, and certain self-assessed income tax liabilities.

In the case of VAT, PAYE (Employer) and excess TWSS liabilities, Period 1 refers to the period when a business has been unable to trade due to the Covid-19 related restrictions and includes the first full two monthly VAT period after the business resumes trading. For example, if a business has been closed due to Covid-19 restrictions but resumes trading in April 2021, it will be able to warehouse liabilities accrued from March 2020 up to the end of June 2021.

Revenue has confirmed that where a business re-opened but has had to close again due to the

re-imposition of restrictions, the trade is deemed to be still subject to the restrictions provided for in the regulations under sections 5 and 31A Health Act 1947 until it has re-opened again. This means that VAT, PAYE (Employer) and excess TWSS liabilities for such businesses can continue to be warehoused in respect of the extended restricted period.

Following the expiration of Period 1, businesses are afforded a further 12 months (“Period 2”) during which collection of warehoused liabilities will be deferred.

No interest will be charged on outstanding Covid-19 liabilities in either Period 1 or Period 2. In cases where businesses have been subject to re-imposition of restrictions intermittently since March 2020, the earliest liabilities warehoused (Jan/Feb VAT and Feb PAYE) have already been warehoused at 0% interest for almost 12 months. Where such businesses do not resume trading until April 2021, these liabilities may be warehoused at 0% interest for a period of 28 months in total (from March 2020 until June 2022). Interest on warehoused liabilities is charged thereafter at c. 3% per annum until the liabilities are paid in full (this is “Period 3” of the warehousing scheme).

Legislation underpinning the warehousing of VAT, PAYE (Employer) liabilities and over-payments of TWSS provides that Period 2 may be extended by Ministerial order but cannot extend beyond 31 December 2022. This is to ensure compliance with EU State Aid rules, provided for under the EU Temporary Framework for State Aid measures to support the economy in the current COVID-19 outbreak.

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

*Question No. 307 answered with Question No. 275.*

*Question No. 308 answered with Question No. 287.*

## **Economic Data**

**309. Deputy Louise O’Reilly** asked the Minister for Finance if he has read the economic letter from a former Governor of the Central Bank (details supplied) which outlined that the prosperity of the Irish economy ranks somewhere between eighth and twelfth in the European Union, closer to Italy than the more prosperous Nordic states. [13528/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Professor Honohan’s letter compares Ireland’s economic prosperity internationally using per capita measures of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), modified Gross National Income and Actual Individual Consumption. As the letter highlights, using GDP as a comparative measure of the size of the Irish economy internationally is not representative as it does not accurately reflect what is going on in the domestic economy, given the size of our multinational sector. For this reason, modified Gross National Income (or GNI\*), which excludes some of the statistical distortions arising from the multinational sector, enables a more meaningful measure of the size of the Irish economy. The letter also uses Actual Individual Consumption, which refers to all goods and services actually consumed by households. While this indicator is a useful guide for economic welfare, international comparisons can be challenging because of the difficulties in comparing the quality of different countries goods and services as well as differing savings rates among countries.

Professor Honohan’s letter indicates that if we use GDP per capita in 2019, Ireland was ranked in second place in the EU, behind only Luxembourg. However, If we use GNI\* per

capita, Ireland instead was found to rank in eighth place or inside the top third of EU countries. When using Actual Individual Consumption per capita, Ireland was ranked in twelfth place in the EU in 2019 but remains in the top half of EU countries.

Nevertheless, the letter in its conclusion acknowledges that Ireland is a prosperous country but that a range of measures of economic wellbeing should be considered. I wish to assure the Deputy that when assessing the position of the economy, my Department examines a wide range of economic indicators and the government will continue to pursue sensible policies aimed at ensuring sustainable growth and the well-being of all our citizens.

### **Tax Code**

310. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank governors of the G20 on 26 February 2021 and discussions regarding pillars I and II of the G20 and OECD inclusive framework, in particular the apparent change in position of the United States of America; the response of the Government and the preparations for developments in this area over the coming months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13545/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Deputy will be aware that at their 26 February meeting, the G20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors re-iterated their support for finding a solution to the tax challenges raised by globalisation and the digitalisation of the economy.

I share this goal, and in this context, Ireland is engaging constructively in the discussions at the OECD/G20 Inclusive Framework on BEPS where it is hoped that a sustainable agreement can be achieved in 2021 by the 139 members of the Inclusive Framework which meets the needs of all countries large and small, developed and developing.

While there remain substantial issues to be resolved, and indeed political level discussions on the key policy issues have not yet taken place, the renewed commitment by the United States bodes well for achieving a sustainable comprehensive agreement. Without a global solution, we will see unilateral and regional measures continue to proliferate, with consequent negative impacts on trade at a time when the need for stability in such matters is essential and a return to economic growth is paramount to assist recovery post-pandemic.

Ireland has seen the benefits of international cooperation and it is my belief that working together within the multilateral framework offered by the OECD is the only way to ensure a stable international tax system into the future.

### **Financial Services Regulation**

311. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if he has engaged with a company (details supplied) in view of the €4.13 million fine by the Central Bank on 2 March 2021 in relation to a transaction made by a consortium of employees of the company in 2014; if he has had engagements with the NTMA regarding same; if he will seek the disengagement of State agencies and Departments which have commercial relationships with the company; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13546/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I have not engaged directly with J and E Davy regarding the investigation and sanction by the Central Bank of Ireland but the Deputy

will be aware of statements I have made on the matter since it emerged into the public domain, reflecting the seriousness in which I view the matter.

The Deputy will also be aware of the decision by the Board of the NTMA on 8th March to withdraw J & E Davy's authority to act as a primary dealer in Irish Government bonds. I note and support this decision. This is the appropriate decision given the recent very serious findings of the Central Bank.

State Bodies which have commercial relationships with private companies keep those engagements under review, and are best placed to do so, to ensure the best and most appropriate use of taxpayer's money. My Department has in place a procurement framework which allows the Department to seek and obtain advice on financial matters such as the future disposal of the State's banking sector investments. Contracts are awarded following a competitive Request for Tender procedure between members of the Framework. Firms were appointed to the Framework for an initial period of three years (up to October 2021) with an option to extend by one additional year (up to October 2022). Davy are one of twelve firms on Framework Lot 3 - capital markets distribution services. No contracts have been awarded under Lot 3 since the Framework was constituted and as such the Department does not currently have a commercial relationship with J & E Davy.

### **Departmental Advertising**

312. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Finance the amount spent across his Department on advertising in relation to Covid-19 by month and by media outlet (details supplied) from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021. [13558/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I can advise the Deputy that my Department has no record of any spend on advertising in relation to Covid-19 involving the media outlets named, from 1st March 2020 to 1st March 2021.

### **Parental Leave**

313. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to top up the additional three weeks parent's leave and benefit once it is rolled out in view of the fact that local authorities previously topped up the payment of €245 for existing provision of parental leave and benefit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12793/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I assume that the Deputy is referring to parent's leave as parental leave is unpaid.

The Parent's Leave and Benefit Act 2019 introduced two weeks of Parent's Leave for each parent to be taken in the first year after the birth or adoptive placement of a child. This is paid from the Social Insurance Fund at a rate of €245 per week. In relation to the additional three weeks that the Deputy refers to, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth will be amending the 2019 Act to commence the extension of parent's leave. The benefit will be paid at the same rate.

### **Drainage Schemes**

314. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if

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drainage works in Ballyduff, County Kerry will be extended to include a location (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12536/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The Office of Public Works (OPW) is responsible for the maintenance of Arterial Drainage Schemes completed under the Arterial Drainage Act, 1945.

The fields and channels referred to by the Deputy are outside the bounds of the Feale Catchment Drainage Scheme and therefore do not form part of the Arterial Drainage Scheme under the auspices of this office.

The OPW has no maintenance responsibility at that location, nor the authority to carry out any works there.

### Flood Relief Schemes

315. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform when a decision will be made on an application by Galway County Council for funding for flood relief works at Brook Lodge, Ballyglunin, County Galway under the minor works flood relief scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12581/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** Local flooding issues are a matter, in the first instance, for each Local Authority to investigate and address. All Local Authorities may carry out flood mitigation works, using either their own resources, or by applying for funding under the OPW Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme.

Under this scheme, applications are considered for projects that are estimated to cost not more than €750,000 in each instance. Funding of up to 90% of the cost is available for approved projects. Applications are assessed by the OPW having regard to the specific economic, social and environmental criteria of the scheme, including a cost benefit ratio and having regard to the availability of funding for flood risk management. Full details of this scheme are available on [www.gov.ie/opw](http://www.gov.ie/opw)

I am advised the OPW is currently considering an application submitted by Galway County Council under the OPW Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme for a project at Brook Lodge, Ballyglunin. A decision in relation to this project will issue to Galway County Council in the coming weeks.

### Garda Stations

316. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform when construction will recommence on a Garda station (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12656/21]

317. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform when construction will commence on a Garda station (details supplied); if he considers it essential construction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12660/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 316 and 317 together.

The refurbishment works at Fitzgibbon St Garda Station were on schedule to be completed in March 2021, however, works were suspended on site from 6pm 8th January 2021 in accordance with the current Covid-19 restrictions.

The works will recommence on site when the current Covid 19 restrictions are lifted.

### **Flood Relief Schemes**

318. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of plans for the flood relief in Kenmare, County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12691/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** There is currently a steering group in place, comprising representatives of the Office of Public Works and Kerry County Council, to progress the Kenmare Flood Relief Scheme. Kenmare is being implemented as part of the first tranche of 60 new schemes that have been prioritised for implementation nationally as part of the Flood Relief Management Plans.

In October 2020 Kerry County Council issued a request for tenders for engineering design consultants and environmental consultants to the Office of Public Works' framework of consultants. Three tender submissions were received and these submissions are currently being evaluated. It is expected to appoint a consultant in the coming weeks. The appointed consultant will be tasked with identifying and designing a flood relief scheme to alleviate the risk of flooding to Kenmare to a determined standard of protection and to procure, manage and oversee the construction of the scheme.

In advance of the larger Kenmare Flood Relief Scheme, interim works are currently being carried out. These works involve the clearance of vegetation (primarily overhanging tree branches) and debris along a stretch of the Keelnagower river which pose an immediate risk in a flood event as they may contribute to blockages of bridges as was seen in the recent flooding event in Kenmare, where a number of properties were flooded. The clearance of this vegetation will also allow for various surveys to take place (site investigations, environmental baseline etc.). An Environmental Screening was carried out to ensure that there would be no adverse environmental effects and the appropriate state agencies were consulted with regards to the works. These works are substantially complete.

A Coastal Wave and Water Level Study is due to commence in the coming weeks which will allow for the analysis of wave-overtopping and will form part of the overall flood relief scheme for Kenmare.

### **Flood Prevention Measures**

319. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the progress to date on the €7 million investment in the removal of the pinch points on the River Shannon which will address the scale of summer flooding in the Shannon Callows; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12785/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** In December, 2019, the Government noted that the Shannon Flood Risk State Agency Co-ordination Working Group agreed to provide €7m from the OPW Vote to Waterways Ireland to implement a co-ordinated strategic programme of maintenance activities

for the River Shannon and for the removal of a number of constrictions in the Callows region. These proposed works can delay flooding and also benefit navigation and agricultural lands.

Waterways Ireland are advancing a range of these measures and expect to commence work on these in 2021. Some of the more complex measures will be subject to the full environmental assessments required and planning consent to proceed. Under the auspices of the Shannon Flood Risk State Agency Co-ordination Working Group, Waterways Ireland and the OPW are working together on the preparation of the applications for the necessary consents and planning permissions.

### **Flood Prevention Measures**

320. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the plans the OPW has put in place to carry out channel cleaning on the Killimor arterial drainage scheme, County Galway in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12786/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The Office of Public Works is responsible for the maintenance of Arterial Drainage Schemes completed under the Arterial Drainage Act, 1945.

During 2021, arterial drainage maintenance works consisting of 58kms of minor channel and 5kms of major channel are planned at various locations across the catchment for the Killimor Catchment Drainage Scheme.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

321. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will consider an extension of opening hours for the Iveagh Gardens in summer 2021 in view of the continued restrictions impacting the availability of activities for citizens elsewhere. [12825/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The Iveagh Gardens are open daily from 8am to 6pm from March to October, with the exception of Sundays and Bank Holidays, when they open at 10am.

The Gardens are located in close proximity to St Stephens Green Park which provides all visitors to and from the area with 22 acres of open space, wide expansive paths for social distancing and it is open to the public from dawn to dusk seven days a week. The public therefore has access, in the immediate area, to a suitable park/garden facility for daylight hours.

Notwithstanding the ongoing challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated restrictions, the Office of Public Works has no plans to extend the opening hours of the Iveagh Gardens this summer.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

322. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if consideration has been given to the reopening of the construction sector in relation to current public health guidelines; and the timeframe and measures which will be put in place to ensure safety while also supporting the sector. [12826/21]

**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.

### Departmental Internships

323. **Deputy Louise O’Reilly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under his aegis in 2019; the cost in terms of wages and allowances; and the estimated numerical capacity of State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis. [12960/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The information requested by the Deputy regarding the 2019 work experience or internship opportunities for students in the bodies under the aegis of my Department is set out in the table below.

Body	No. of Placements	Total Cost	Future Capacity
Public Appointments Service	10 work experience placements	No Cost	6-8 work experience students per annum <sup>2</sup> Internship placements per annum
National Shared Services Office	3 work experience placements	No Cost	6 work experience students per annum <sup>1</sup> intern currently under the WAM programme
Office of the Regulator of the National Lottery	No placements in 2019	No Cost	1 placement
Office of the Ombudsman	1 Placement - student of a degree course paid at the minimum of the Clerical Officer grade	€11,474	1 placement
Office of Public Works	21 work experience placements as part of horticultural college courses	€23,489	Estimated target of 50 in a full year, subject to public health guidelines
State Laboratory	8 placements - third year students of a degree course paid at the minimum of the Clerical Officer grade	€107,315	8 placements

### Heritage Sites

324. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the annual cost to date of the maintenance and protection of the national monument buildings at Nos. 14-17 Moore Street since the Office of Public Works assumed responsibility for the buildings in 2017, in tabular form. [13328/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O’Donovan):** The information on the annual cost to date of the maintenance and protection of the National Monument buildings at Nos. 14-17 Moore Street since the Office of Public Works assumed responsibility for their care in 2017 is attached in tabular form. These costs are associated with security, consultancy fees, pest control, weed spraying. Some relatively minor

direct labour costs associated with fabric inspections are not included in the statement.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-10\_pq324-10-03-21\_en.pdf">Table</a>]

### Departmental Advertising

325. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the amount spent across his Department on advertising in relation to Covid-19 by month and by media outlet (details supplied) from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021. [13564/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department has had no expenditure of this nature.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

326. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the actions her Department has taken to actively deter short-term holiday lets during level 5 restrictions that have been the subject of social gatherings and parties in direct conflict with level 5 restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13057/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** With regard to Level 5 restrictions under the updated *COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery Plan 2021 – The Path Ahead*, the Government agreed to extend the current public health restrictions until 5th April 2021. 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. This is regularly reinforced by Government communications and advertising. My Department and its agencies continue to support and amplify this message, including Fáilte Ireland, who also work with industry partners. In this context, the provision of non-essential tourism accommodation is not permitted and all the industry group are fully aware of this, including through communications from Fáilte Ireland.

### Fáilte Ireland

327. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if Fáilte Ireland has established destination recovery task forces for County Mayo; and the remit, role and strategy and other relevant information on the task forces. [12480/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The establishment, remit, role and strategy of destination recovery task forces are operational matters for Fáilte Ireland. I have referred the Deputy's question to Fáilte Ireland for direct reply. Please contact my private office if you have not received a reply within ten working days.

### Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

328. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if a detailed list will be provided of the allocations made by national govern-

ing bodies of sport in receipt of funding in excess of €100,000 from the Covid resilience fund to units within their respective organisations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12498/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** As the Deputy will be aware, a Covid-19 funding package of €85 million was provided last year to support the sport sector. This significant investment benefited all levels of the sport sector including thousands of grassroots clubs across the country and provided some certainty for sporting organisations in their planning for 2021.

As the Covid-19 funding schemes are administered by Sport Ireland, I am arranging for Sport Ireland to respond directly to the Deputy. Please contact my office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

### **Sport Ireland**

329. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if Sport Ireland has commenced the recruitment process for its new chief executive; if not, when it will commence; when she will approve this process before commencement; if the Public Appointments Service will have a role in the recruitment of the new chief executive; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12499/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** In accordance with section 22 of the Sport Ireland Act 2015, the chief executive shall be appointed by Sport Ireland with the approval of the Minister.

The current CEO's contract is in place until 31 December 2021. The commencement of a process for the recruitment and appointment of a new CEO is being discussed between my officials and Sport Ireland. I will consider Sport Ireland's requests for the necessary approvals in line with the Guidelines for the Appointment of CEOs of Non-Commercial State Bodies as the process is progressed.

In relation to the role of the Public Appointments Service (PAS), it is expected that the position will be advertised by PAS on the stateboards.ie portal. Any involvement by PAS in the candidate selection process will be subject to discussions with PAS in the usual way for such positions.

### **Arts Funding**

330. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the number of applications for funding received by the Arts Council in 2020; the number of those applications that were approved for funding; the number of those applications that were rejected for funding; and the details of same. [12502/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** Primary responsibility for promoting practice of the arts rests with the Arts Council under the Arts Act 2003. It should be noted that under the Arts Act 2003, the Arts Council is statutorily independent in its funding decisions.

I understand that in 2020, the Council received more than 6,500 applications. This compares with just 3,500 in the previous year. Of the 6,500 2020 applications, 529 were deemed ineligible and 2,743 were not approved. A total of 3,241 applications were approved, awarded

funding and processed for payment. It should be noted that these figures are draft figures and will be finalised in the context of the Arts Council's financial statement currently in preparation.

The Arts Council operates numerous funding schemes every year and these are all advertised on its website. The Council publishes details of its funding decisions on its website at the following link <http://www.artscouncil.ie/funding-decisions/>.

Funding decisions are also routinely published in the Arts Council newsletter, and historical decisions are recorded in the Arts Council's annual reports which are available online in the publications section.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

331. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she plans to introduce a specific grant for individual businesses to allow them to adapt their premises to provide facilities for outdoor dining given that it is expected that outdoor dining will be central to the tourism market in 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12537/21]

345. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will request Fáilte Ireland to include counties such as Tipperary in the outdoor dining grant scheme as requested by an association (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12851/21]

357. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she plans to request that Fáilte Ireland open the outdoor dining scheme to all counties including County Donegal; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13508/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 331, 345 and 357 together.

All tourism funding schemes are designed and operated by Fáilte Ireland as the National Tourism Development Authority. With specific regard to outdoor dining, I understand that Fáilte Ireland is currently considering how best it could support outdoor dining experiences, including scoping out a proposed Outdoor Dining Scheme which has not yet been finalised or launched. I am advised that no final decisions have been made as to the parameters of the proposed scheme.

As the development of supports for outdoor dining experiences is an operational matter for Fáilte Ireland, I have referred the Deputies' questions to the agency for further information. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

332. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she plans to publish the names of persons and companies involved in behind the scenes and production work who benefited from the live performance support scheme alongside the performer, venue and promoter recipients whose names were published in November 2020; the efforts that were made to ensure an equitable distribution of funding to ensure companies involved in multiple productions did not receive a disproportionate advantage compared to others struggling without work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12576/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The key aim of the pilot “Live Performance Support Scheme” was to assist commercial venues, producers and promoters of live performances to provide employment to workers in the creative industries while also producing high quality live performances for the public.

The grant funding allocated allowed venues, technicians, artists, producers, promoters and other creatives to ensure performances continued during COVID-19, while adhering to public safety guidelines, whatever level of lock-down restrictions or reduced capacities were in place.

The success of the pilot scheme can be seen in a recent report published by the “Live Venue Collective” who received over €1 million in funding under this pilot scheme. The collective stated in their report that they presented a total of 405 shows of the highest cultural quality, involving 2110 employees, 655 artists, over 416,259 online audience members and 24,000 minutes of digital content created. The Live Venue Collective report also published a full list of artists who received funding from their grant allocation.

It should also be noted that thousands of creatives were involved in the pilot scheme, right across Ireland, and a full list of recipients of grant funding and their locations has already been published on the Department website;

<https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/a415f-minister-martin-announces-recipients-of-funding-under-the-5-million-pilot-live-performance-support-scheme/#>

While the listing of all creatives is not being published by the Department, the Deputy will find the majority of the live streamed events supported by the LPSS free on line. These carry credits for performers and “behind the scenes” creatives, organisations and individuals and they can be viewed by everyone.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

333. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if recipients of the pilot live performance support scheme will be eligible for any future roll-out of the scheme; her plans to ensure those who did not benefit from the pilot scheme are not excluded again; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12577/21]

334. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the amount allocated in relation to the live performance support scheme; if any of the original promised funding has been allocated to other industry-related proposals; and when the application process will be open to applicants. [12578/21]

343. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the way in which she will ensure that the €50 million to be provided for promoters, producers and live music venues will filter down to individual small businesses in this sector; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12840/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 333, 334 and 343 together.

I was pleased yesterday to announce a new €50 million suite of measures to support those in the Live Entertainment Sector.

As part of this suite, an allocation of €25 million is being made available under the Live Performance Support Scheme 2021. This scheme builds on the successful outcomes of the pilot Live Performance Support Scheme (LPSS) in 2020, which provided thousands of days of

employment to hundreds of musicians, actors, crew and technicians and the valuable insights gained. This new scheme is aimed at commercial venues, producers and promoters in the culture sector and will support employment and wellbeing opportunities across all genres and continued high quality artistic output for the general public. Grant recipients of the pilot LPSS may apply under this new scheme. The scheme has been developed following consultation with the sector and will be managed directly by my Department. The Live Performance Support Scheme 2021 will be open for applications on 19th March 2021 and further information can be found on my Department's website.

An allocation of €5 million will also be made available to local authorities for outdoor live performances in summer 2021 to animate town centres, should public health considerations permit. This will allow for the procurement by local authorities of performances by local performers. Performances can be recorded or streamed if health restrictions prevent live events. Local authorities will be encouraged to engage events companies to develop and deliver a programme of performances.

As a further support measure for those in the live entertainment industry, an allocation of €14m will be made available for a new scheme to make a contribution to the overheads of businesses that have been significantly negatively affected by COVID-19 and that do not qualify for other business supports. The main features of this new Music Entertainment Business Assistance Scheme (MEBAS) will see support offered by way of two levels of flat payments:

- €2,500 for businesses with a VAT-exclusive turnover of €20,000 - €100,000;
- €5,000 for businesses with a VAT-exclusive turnover in excess of €100,000.

Self-employed businesses whether sole traders, partnerships and incorporated entities operating exclusively within the commercial live entertainment sector are eligible to apply. The scheme will open when the necessary administrative and IT systems are in place.

€5 million will also be made available for a scheme of capital supports for the commercial live entertainment sector. This will be applied to supporting the installation of high quality recording and streaming facilities in venues through a competitive grant application process.

Up to €1 million has been allocated to the St Patrick's Festival 2021 for programming to support the employment of performers, producers, artists, technicians, creatives and support staff. With gatherings still restricted, SPF 2021 has curated a rich and dynamic programme of events involving hundreds of artists, musicians, performers, creators, and community organisations that will be broadcast on the St. Patrick's Festival TV online channel over six days and nights, marking the national day.

## **Sports Funding**

335. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if a full list of the funding streams available for community sports initiatives will be provided; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12585/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** Sport Ireland, which is funded by my Department, is the statutory body with responsibility for the development of sport, including the allocation of funding under its various programmes. Sport Ireland channels its funding through the relevant National Governing Bodies of Sport.

I am arranging for Sport Ireland to provide the Deputy with details of the funding streams available for community sports initiatives. Please contact my office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

In relation to capital supports, my Department's Sports Capital and Equipment Programme (SCEP) is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country. Any organisation that has not already registered with the Department and wishes to apply for funding must first register on [www.sportscapitalprogramme.ie](http://www.sportscapitalprogramme.ie). The most recent round of the programme closed on March 1st last and received 3,106 applications.

### **Sports Funding**

336. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the criteria used to determine access to the high performance programme as operated by an organisation (details supplied); the process used to determine the potential cycling athletes for Paris 2024; the breakdown of funding to the organisation in 2020; the way it was distributed by training camps, salaries and competitions at junior and senior level; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12594/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** Sport Ireland provides funding to the organisation referred to by the Deputy to support the operation of its high performance programme. There are two streams of funding allocated by Sport Ireland which are central to the delivery of the organisation's programme including High Performance Programme Funding and the International Carding Scheme.

High Performance Programme Funding is provided to support a range of activities including salaries, training camps and competitions at junior and senior level, pathway development, and performance services. In 2020, the organisation received €440,000 in High Performance Programme Funding.

The International Carding Scheme provides financial support to athletes for their training and competition programmes. The primary purpose of this funding is to support Irish athletes in reaching finals and achieving medals at European, World, Olympic and Paralympic level.

The International Carding Scheme is criteria based requiring athletes to achieve standards set forth by their NGB in agreement with Sport Ireland. These standards are based on performances achieved at international competitions. Athletes are considered and approved for funding by Sport Ireland based on applications received from the organisation. As part of the International Carding Scheme Sport Ireland allocated €426,000 to the organisation, which was made up of €224,000 for their Olympic Programme and €202,000 for their Paralympic Programme.

Further to those listed on the International Carding Scheme, Sport Ireland recognises that there will be other athletes who will require support from the NGB, specifically those who are tracking to compete in Paris 2024. Sport Ireland has recently engaged with the organisation who have confirmed their intention to establish an alternative mechanism of support for these athletes which may include service provision, training camp and competition exposure, or direct athlete funding through alternative resources. The organisation will be responsible for developing this mechanism of support recognising it must be sport specific and reflective of the capacity within the NGB.

In 2021 the organisation is projecting an expenditure of €583,500 on International Competi-

tions, Training Camps and Support Services for all athletes (Senior, Junior, Youth & U23). It is proposed to allocate 2/3 of this support to Senior Athletes with 1/3 allocated to Junior, Youth & U23. This is broadly consistent with what was planned for 2020 notwithstanding the disruption caused by COVID-19.

### **Sports Funding**

337. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the funding her Department provides to Paralympic athletes who have qualified for the forthcoming Tokyo Olympics; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12648/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The process for qualification to the Paralympic Games is ongoing. To date, 5 athletes have achieved automatic quota places for the Paralympic Games through World Championship performances. Further qualification will be secured through ranking results and slots awarded by the International Paralympic Committee to Ireland. It is anticipated that the final team size will be between 25-30 athletes.

Sport Ireland, which is funded by my Department, is the statutory body with responsibility for the development of sport, including high performance sport and its funding allocations. It provides a range of supports to Paralympics Ireland to support their high performance programmes and athletes. Specifically, in respect of athlete support, the Sport Ireland International Carding Scheme provides financial assistance to athletes for their training and competition programmes. The primary purpose of this funding is to support Irish athletes in reaching finals and achieving medals at European, World, Olympic and Paralympic level. The International Carding Scheme is criteria based requiring athletes to achieve standards set forth by their NGB, in agreement with Sport Ireland.

In 2021, Sport Ireland will provide €620,000 in direct athlete supports to para athletes in a range of sports through the International Carding Scheme.

In addition Sport Ireland (through the Sport Ireland Institute) will also provide other non-financial supports in the following areas:

- Sport Ireland Institute & Paralympics Ireland have extended their Games support partnership to cover the postponed Games. This has confirmed the appointment of five specific Institute practitioners to the Irish Paralympic Team covering S&C, Nutrition, Physiology, Transition support and Performance Analysis.

- Sport Ireland are currently working with Paralympics Ireland to identify and resource a further addition to their medical staff for the Games arising from the extensive COVID-19 protocols in place.

- 301 direct support days to Para sports was provided by the Sport Ireland Institute Team in 2020 representing 13.87% of the total resource.

### **Sports Funding**

338. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if her attention has been drawn to the fact that some Irish Olympic athletes have been forced to fundraise to supplement their training and participation in the games; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12649/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** I assume that the Deputy is referring to fundraising activity recently publicised by Paralympics Ireland.

Sport Ireland, which is funded by my Department, is the statutory body with responsibility for the development of sport, including high performance sport and its funding allocations. It provides funding to Paralympics Ireland to support its administration and operational costs. Sport Ireland also provides High Performance Programme funding to Paralympics Ireland to support the delivery of its para programme, which supports Irish athletes in reaching finals and achieving medals at European Championships, World Championships, and the Paralympic Games.

In addition to the annual funding allocations, Sport Ireland has provided Paralympics Ireland with a package of funding for the Paralympic Games throughout the Tokyo cycle. Due to Covid-19 it is reasonable to anticipate that further costs will arise for Paralympic Ireland in 2021 recognising that additional protective measures are required for Team Ireland. These costs relate to the necessity for single room occupancy, private transportation, additional Covid-19 officers, and a PCR testing programme. In this regard, Sport Ireland will run an extensive funding process for high performance sport in 2021. This process will determine the immediate and confirmed costs to Paralympics Ireland, which are reasonable and beyond the funding previously provided to address Games costs. This commitment for further funding has been formally communicated to Paralympics Ireland

To enhance the capacity and capability of high performance programmes, Sport Ireland encourages National Governing Bodies including Paralympics Ireland to establish robust business plans which are underpinned by stable and diverse income streams. Paralympics Ireland have a clear target for sponsorship and fundraising income in 2021, which will supplement funding received through Sport Ireland.

Throughout the Tokyo cycle 2017-2020, and in year 1 of the Paris cycle which coincides with the rescheduled Paralympic Games 2021, Sport Ireland has provided €7,722,500 in funding to Paralympics Ireland. The table below details these funding streams and associated allocations.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-11\_pq338-10-03-21\_en.docx ">Table</a>]

### **Tax Credits**

339. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she is considering a replacement for the stay and spend scheme as introduced; if she has met with the Minister for Finance regarding such a scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12653/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The Tourism Recovery Oversight Group recently presented its first report to me and I have brought the report to the attention of my cabinet colleagues. Among the steps the Group recommend is a revision of the Stay and Spend initiative to make it more consumer friendly and extending the qualifying period to the end of 2021.

I am advised by the Minister for Finance that Stay and Spend is scheduled to operate until 30 April but the flexibility exists for him to extend its operation in 2021 beyond that date (to end 2021). The Minister for Finance has further advised that decisions on next steps relating to

the scheme have yet to be taken and he will continue to assess matters as circumstances evolve.

### Sports Capital Programme

340. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will consider an issue for a sports club (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12655/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Sports Capital and Equipment Programme is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country.

The 2020 round of the Sports Capital and Equipment Programme closed for applications on Monday 1st March. By the closing date, 3,106 applications were submitted seeking over €200m in funding. This is the highest number of applications ever received.

The scoring system and assessment procedures are currently being finalised and all applications, including the application referred to by the Deputy, will be assessed in accordance with these. Given the large number of applications received this assessment process is likely to take several months. As soon as this process is complete all applicants will be informed of the outcome of the assessment of their application.

### Departmental Funding

341. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the amount of funding her Department provided to each national cultural institution in 2019, 2020 and 2021, in tabular form [12726/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The following table sets out the annual funding that has been allocated to national cultural institutions in 2019, 2020 and 2021:

-	2019	2020	2021
Crawford Art Gallery	1,489,000	1,499,000	1,733,000
Chester Beatty	2,801,000	2,837,000	3,216,000
Irish Museum of Modern Art	5,958,000	6,014,000	6,410,000
National Concert Hall	3,048,000	3,062,000	11,824,000
National Museum of Ireland	14,109,000	14,259,000	15,178,000
National Gallery of Ireland	10,547,000	10,657,000	11,381,000
National Library of Ireland	7,825,000	7,915,000	8,383,000
National Archives of Ireland	1,666,000	1,666,000	2,066,000
Total	47,443,000	47,909,000	60,191,000

### Sports Capital Programme

342. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of a sports capital grant application (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12833/21]

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

**Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Sports Capital and Equipment Programme is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country.

The 2020 round of the Sports Capital and Equipment Programme closed for applications on Monday 1st March. By the closing date, 3,106 applications were submitted seeking over €200m in funding. This is the highest number of applications ever received.

The scoring system and assessment procedures are currently being finalised and all applications, including the application referred to by the Deputy, will be assessed in accordance with these. Given the large number of applications received this assessment process is likely to take several months. As soon as this process is complete all applicants will be informed of the outcome of the assessment of their application.

*Question No. 343 answered with Question No. 333.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

344. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if supports are available or will be provided for businesses (details supplied) in County Clare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12844/21]

**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 including the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) as well as the ReStart grants and tax warehousing provisions.

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 to apply for that scheme is based on the likelihood that for businesses with turnover less than €50,000, non-payroll fixed costs will be sufficiently low to enable the owners furlough the business by availing of other state aids namely income supports such as PUP and EWSS.

I have asked Fáilte Ireland to examine this case and to make contact with them in regard to options for support.

*Question No. 345 answered with Question No. 331.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

346. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the additional supports to be made available to local newspapers in view of the continuing lockdown; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12867/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** A strong and independent media sector is central to our parliamentary democracy,

freedom of speech and to the provision of quality and impartial information, particularly in the context of Covid-19. I recognise the essential role that the print media plays in this regard and the particular value of local and regional newspapers in bringing communities together and sharing reliable and relevant local news. The production and publication of newspapers, journals and periodicals and the distribution of those publications has been listed as an essential service. The Government has put in place a range of supports for all businesses impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which are available to local newspapers.

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

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

In terms of specific supports for the sector, the Deputy will appreciate it is of particular importance in relation to media organisations to avoid any perception of Government interference or influence and the funding of newspapers is therefore a complex issue. I am however cognisant of the importance of this sector, and the financial issues which it currently faces.

Since I assumed formal responsibility for the media sector in September 2020, I have engaged in meetings with key stakeholders including Newsbrands, Local Ireland and the National Union of Journalists (NUJ). Most recently I met with Local Ireland on Wednesday 17th February. My officials continue to engage with all relevant stakeholders in order to explore the issues facing the sector.

### **Departmental Internships**

347. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under her aegis in 2019; the cost in terms of wages and allowances; and the estimated numerical capacity of State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis. [12964/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** As Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, I have responsibility for the governance of State Agencies and bodies under the aegis of my Department.

With regard to your question concerning student work experience and internships, and associated costings, with State and semi-State Agencies, this is an operational matter for the respective Agencies. In that context, I will forward your question to the relevant Agencies and bodies, under the aegis of my Department, and request them to respond directly to you on the matter. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

### **Gender Equality**

348. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if her attention has been drawn to the gender disparity data report on Irish radio; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12987/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I am strongly supportive of the promotion of gender balance on our broadcasting services. I am familiar with the report on gender disparity on Irish radio and I recently met with the producers of the report. My officials continue to engage with all relevant stakeholders in order to further explore appropriate approaches to the issues raised in the report.

The Broadcasting Act 2009 sets out the statutory framework for the regulation of sound broadcasting services. The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) is the independent regulator for sound broadcasting content in the State. Commercial radio stations are subject to contractual obligations, including public service commitments with the BAI, which are agreed upon during the licensing process. Compliance with such obligations is monitored by the BAI.

The BAI have undertaken a number of positive actions in relation to gender balance on our broadcasting services. In 2018, BAI produced a Gender Action Plan aimed at promoting gender equality in the Irish audiovisual sector through its key pillars: data collection and publication, research, encouraging gender initiatives and accountability. Under BAI's Sound & Vision Funding Scheme, the assessment of applications has included consideration of the number of women in key creative roles, as a measure to support greater gender equality in the industry. This information is then used as an assessment criterion as part of the BAI's assessment process.

The Programme for Government provided for the establishment of the Future of Media Commission to consider the future of print, broadcast, and online media in a platform agnostic fashion. The Commission, chaired by Professor Brian MacCraith, recently concluded a public consultation. I am aware that submissions have been made to the consultation by Women on Air, an advocacy group for the representation of women on broadcasting media, and by the Equality Expert Group, a new collective of experts drawn from a variety of fields, public and private, seeking to support equality and diversity in Irish social, economic and cultural life.

### **Sports Capital Programme**

349. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when she expects to announce the results of the latest round of applications for the sports capital grant (detail supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13029/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Sports Capital and Equipment Programme is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country.

The 2020 round of the Sports Capital and Equipment Programme closed for applications on Monday 1st March. By the closing date, 3,106 applications were submitted seeking over €200m in funding. This is the highest number of applications ever received.

The scoring system and assessment procedures are currently being finalised and all applications, including the application referred to by the Deputy, will be assessed in accordance with these. Given the large number of applications received this assessment process is likely to take several months. As soon as this process is complete all applicants will be informed of the outcome of the assessment of their application.

## Sports Capital Programme

350. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of a sports capital grant application (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13075/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Sports Capital and Equipment Programme is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country.

The 2020 round of the Sports Capital and Equipment Programme closed for applications on Monday 1st March. By the closing date, 3,106 applications were submitted seeking over €200m in funding. This is the highest number of applications ever received.

The scoring system and assessment procedures are currently being finalised and all applications, including the application referred to by the Deputy, will be assessed in accordance with these. Given the large number of applications received this assessment process is likely to take several months. As soon as this process is complete all applicants will be informed of the outcome of the assessment of their application.

## Covid-19 Pandemic

351. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the reason for moving indoor visitor attractions to level 2 in COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 - The Path Ahead which is an increase from level 3 under which they previously operated; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13147/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** Since September 2020, the Government has been applying restrictions in line with the Framework for Restrictive Measures contained in the *Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19* and included again as an Appendix to the recent *COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead*.

Public Health advice is clear that this Framework continues to provide an appropriate mechanism to guide decision-making, but experience over the last number of months has underlined the importance of it continuing 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.

Accordingly, the application of the Framework by Government at any given time (including the instance referenced by the Deputy) is informed by that approach

## Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

352. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the reason for the exclusion of marine tourism from all Covid-19 aid schemes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13173/21]

**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 including the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) as well as the ReStart grants and tax warehousing provisions. With specific regard to supports in the tourism sector and for those working in marine tourism, Fáilte Ireland's Covid-19 Adaptation Fund, which was open from August to December 2020, was open to cruise hire companies and to boat tour operators.

Most recently, Fáilte Ireland launched the Tourism Business Continuity Scheme which will provide support to providers of certain tourism services. This includes cruise hire companies and tourism boat tour operators, who have been unable to qualify for assistance under the CRSS. It is designed to help these tourism businesses offset their fixed costs incurred last year and support them to continue operating through 2021.

### **Arts Funding**

353. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the purpose for which the funding of theatres (details supplied) will be used. [13381/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** An amount of €15,000 was paid to the first of the two theatres referred to by the Deputy in October 2020. The funding was for the purpose of capital works to upgrade the box office. No funding was made available by my Department to the second of the two theatres referred to by the Deputy.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

354. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will consider producing a five-year plan with the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment for the hospitality sector with a road to recovery after Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13429/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** As Minister with responsibility for tourism, I am aware that many of our hospitality businesses are dependent on both domestic and inbound tourism for business. Together with the Tánaiste, I jointly chair a Hospitality and Tourism Forum which allows us both to monitor developments in these sectors.

The challenges facing tourism as a result of the pandemic are hugely significant. All tourism activity is affected when businesses cannot open and people cannot travel due to the necessary public health measures introduced. In Ireland, the impact is even greater due to the fact that we are heavily reliant on inbound overseas tourism for approximately three-quarters of all revenue generated and this sector is even more adversely affected by the pandemic.

A Tourism Recovery Taskforce was appointed last May to prepare a Tourism Recovery Plan which includes a set of recommendations on how best the Irish Tourism sector can adapt and recover in a changed tourism environment as a result of the crisis. The Taskforce presented the Tourism Recovery Plan 2020–2023 to me on September 30th last. The Plan makes a number of recommendations to help tourism businesses to survive, stabilise and recover from the COVID pandemic. This Plan has been a very useful input for me as I have considered, along with my Government colleagues, measures to help the tourism sector to survive the effects of

the pandemic and, in time, to recover. The Plan has informed many of the measures we have introduced.

In December, I appointed a Recovery Oversight Group to oversee the implementation of the Recovery Plan and monitor the recovery of the tourism sector. This Group reported to me for the first time last month and I brought this report to the attention of my colleagues in Cabinet. This report welcomed progress made to date and set out a number of areas on which the Oversight Group believes the Government should focus.

I will continue to use the Tourism Recovery Plan and the outputs from the Recovery Oversight Group to inform my thinking as the situation evolves. Overall, a recovery in tourism activity will serve to help all of those businesses which depend on tourism to generate revenue.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

355. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will consider emergency financial support for a castle (details supplied) County Clare. [13450/21]

**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 including the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) as well as the ReStart grants and tax warehousing provisions.

Most recently, Fáilte Ireland launched the Tourism Business Continuity Scheme, which will provide support to providers of certain tourism services, including visitor attractions, 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 have asked Fáilte Ireland to examine this case and to make contact with them in regard to options for support.

### **Horse Sport Ireland**

356. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her views on matters raised (details supplied) in relation to the proposed move by Horse Sport Ireland to a new centre of excellence in Greenogue, County Dublin. [13497/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** National Governing Bodies of Sport such as Horse Sport Ireland are independent, autonomous bodies and are responsible for their own operational arrangements and procedures for their sports. The decision by Horse Sport Ireland regarding the relocation of its premises is entirely a matter for Horse Sport Ireland.

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

*Question No. 357 answered with Question No. 331.*

## **Sports Facilities**

358. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if her attention has been drawn to the fact that a club (details supplied) does not have a running track or basic facilities; if the matter will be examined in view of the fact that the area has a fast growing population and a growing need for this facility; the supports that are available to develop this facility; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13531/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Sports Capital and Equipment Programme is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country.

It is open to any organisation with a suitable project to apply for funding. While the 2020 round of the programme closed for applications on the 1st March, it is my intention to advertise a future round of the programme as soon as possible after the assessment process and allocation process is complete. I note that the organisation referred to by the Deputy has registered with my Department for the programme and the designated club contact will be informed when the next round is open for applications.

## **Departmental Advertising**

359. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the amount spent across her Department on advertising on Covid-19 by month and by media outlet (details supplied) from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021. [13568/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I have been informed by officials in my Department that no funding has been allocated for advertising relating to Covid-19 since the beginning of the pandemic. My Department is actively engaged in delivering Covid-19 communications with the public and with stakeholders through various channels. This work is carried out in-house by the communications team and other teams within the Department. As part of its policy response to the crisis, my Department has supported a range of measures to provide for content which would normally be presented to live audiences, to be made available online.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

360. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the rules under level 5 restrictions for a house that has been partially built and has no roof and is therefore exposed to the elements; if the roof can be completed under level 5 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13163/21]

**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).

With regard to private housing development, the Regulations provide that housing and construction works ongoing on 8 January could continue where the works required to render the

property capable of occupation were scheduled for completion by 31 January 2021. The Regulations also provide for the supply and delivery of essential or emergency maintenance and repair services to businesses and homes (including electrical, gas, oil, plumbing, glazing and roofing services) on an emergency call-out basis.

On 23 February, the Government announced that the current level 5 restrictions will remain in place until 5 April 2021, when the easing of restrictions relating to construction will be considered.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

361. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a company (details supplied) with annual local authority rates bill in excess of €100,000 can be granted a waiver on fees in view of Covid-19 related pressures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13320/21]

**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. 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 certain ratepayers, that are not automatically eligible, may also qualify. These applications will be reviewed by local authorities on a case by case basis.

### **Rights of Way**

362. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will extend the November deadline for the registration of rights of way with the Land Registry in view of the fact that many of the technical engineering and legal staff required for the registration of such rights of way are not in a position to do this work due to the present restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13454/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** There appears to be a misapprehension regarding the dates for registering rights of ways acquired by prescription on foot of amendments made by Parts 12 and 13 of the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2011 to the provisions relating to acquisition of easements and profits by prescription contained in Part 8 of the Land and Conveyancing Law Reform Act 2009.

I understand from the Property Registration Authority (PRA) that the following is the position:

1. The extension of the transitional period originally prescribed by Section 38(b) of the

2009 Act (3 years) by the aforementioned 2011 Act (extending the period to 12 years) relates simply to the period when a claim to a prescriptive right can be made by reliance on the 'old' law replaced by the 2009 Act. From 2021, reliance must be made on the 'new' law introduced by the 2009 Act; in particular, reliance must be made on the new single and shorter period of 12 years. There is no question of a cut-off point occurring in 2021 when a claim to a prescriptive right can no longer be made. All that changes in 2021 is the basis on which the prescriptive right can be claimed.

2. The new procedure for registration of a prescriptive right introduced by Section 41 of the 2011 Act is not subject to a time limit. It is a permanent procedure and, in particular, does not cease to be available in 2021. The only change which occurs in 2021 is the basis on which an application must be made to the PRA. As pointed out in (1) above, from 2021, the application will have to be grounded on the 'new' law introduced by the 2009 Act and reliance on the 'old' law repealed by that Act will cease to be possible.

This procedure is only for easements (including rights of way) acquired by prescription. If all parties agree to the registration of an easement, an application should be made by lodging the appropriate Deed of Grant.

Finally, a Practice Direction Easements and Profits à Prendre Acquired by Prescription under Section 49A is available on the PRA's website ([www.prai.ie](http://www.prai.ie)) that covers the process relating to the registration of prescriptive easements.

### **Planning Guidelines**

363. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the working group on rural planning guidelines in his Department; and when revised guidance on the issue of rural planning will be provided to local authorities that are revising their development plans. [12475/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** Under the Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Sustainable Rural Housing 2005, planning authorities are required to frame the planning policies in their development plans in a balanced and measured way that ensures the housing needs of rural communities are met, while avoiding excessive urban-generated housing.

A working group was established to review and, where necessary, recommend changes to the 2005 Guidelines and this group met on five occasions between May 2017 and January 2019. During this period, in 2018, the National Planning Framework (the NPF) was published and provides an important strategic basis for interpreting the 2005 Guidelines. National Policy Objective (NPO) 15 of the NPF fully supports the concept of the sustainable development of rural areas by encouraging growth and arresting decline in areas that have experienced low population growth or decline in recent decades, while simultaneously indicating the need to manage certain areas around cities and towns.

Work is current underway in preparation of an update of the 2005 Sustainable Rural Housing Guidelines for planning authorities, which were issued under Section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended). I expect to receive an initial draft guidelines document shortly. Given the complexity of the issues involved, the need for environmental assessment and both internal and external consultation, I would expect draft updated guidelines to be available in Q2 2021.

My Department communicated to planning authorities (Circular letter PL 2/2017) on 31

May 2017, advising that the existing 2005 Guidelines remain in place until advised otherwise by the Department and this remains valid.

### **Planning Investigations**

364. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when he plans to publish the report by his Department into allegations of planning irregularities in County Donegal. [12476/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I will be examining the report, entitled 'A Review Into Certain Planning Matters in Respect of Donegal County Council', by Mr. Rory Mulcahy S.C., and will bring this matter to Government for consideration in due course.

In this regard, the decisions of the Commissioner for Environmental Information (CEI/18/0019) of 13 February 2019 and the Information Commissioner (OIC-59426-Q8D7T8) of 27 February 2020 in relation to requests to publish this report will also be taken into account. Both decisions are publicly available on those bodies' websites.

### **National Planning Framework**

365. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the way the national planning framework policy objective (details supplied) is being delivered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12481/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** The identification and implementation of greenbelts and green spaces at a regional and city scale is a matter for regional assemblies and local authorities, through the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (including Metropolitan Area Spatial Plans) and City/County Development Plans. Guidance in relation to provision and design of open space at the local level is set out in the Sustainable Residential Development in Urban Areas – Guidelines for Planning Authorities published by my Department in 2009 (and supplemented by the Urban Design Manual also published by my Department in 2009).

My Department is currently working towards developing detailed guidelines in relation to sustainable settlement and best practice urban design, which will incorporate the 2009 Guidelines and Manual. The proposed sustainable settlement guidance will seek to address key issues in relation to the creation of an accessible and interconnected network of open space which responds to natural features and provides a range of active and passive spaces to support the development of sustainable and amenable neighbourhoods that promote a high quality of life for its residents.

The Guidelines will further underpin and support the preparation of statutory development plans by planning authority undertaken in accordance with sections 9-13 of the Planning and Development Act, 2000 (as amended). Specifically Section 10(2) of the Act and the First Schedule thereto provides that a development plan shall include objectives for wide range of issues that will support the achievement of NPO 62.

### **Home Loan Scheme**

366. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his attention has been drawn to the fact that a person (details supplied) in County Tipperary contacted his office regarding a Rebuilding Ireland home loan application; and if he will ensure they are not excluded from same due to their medical history. [12500/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The local authority mortgage protection insurance (MPI) scheme applies to all house purchase loans approved by local authorities since 1 July 1986, including the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan introduced on 1 February 2018. It is an important safeguard for both applicants and lenders.

One of the conditions of the MPI scheme, which is a group policy, is that it is obligatory for all local authority borrowers who meet the eligibility criteria to join the scheme. Altering any conditions of the MPI Scheme could have negative impacts and increase the cost for all existing borrowers. A local authority housing loan applicant who is not eligible for the local authority MPI scheme must source a suitable comparable individual MPI policy from the market.

As Minister, I am statutorily precluded from intervening in relation to individual cases such as this.

### **Housing Policy**

367. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the new national implementation plan for housing first will be published given that the current plan runs from 2018-2021; if increased targets will be put in place; if the associated funding for local authorities will be put in place; his plans to ensure the roll-out of housing first to each local authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12519/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Housing First enables homeless individuals with high levels of complex needs to obtain permanent secure accommodation with the provision of intensive housing and health supports to help them maintain their tenancies.

The National Implementation Plan for Housing First, published in September 2018, which puts the programme on a national footing, is designed to provide this response, by delivering permanent housing solutions and associated supports for rough sleepers and long-term users of emergency accommodation. It extends the delivery of Housing First nationally, with the introduction of targets for each local authority. The Plan includes an overall target of 663 tenancies in the period 2018-2021. The implementation of the Plan is a joint initiative of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the Department of Health, the HSE and the local authorities.

In line with the National Implementation Plan, Housing First is being delivered on a regional basis by the local authorities and the HSE. Contracts for the delivery of services have been put in place in each of the nine regions responsible for the delivery of homeless services with tenancies now in place in every region.

At the end of 2020, a total of 508 individuals were being housed under the Housing First programme including 392 individuals who have been housed since the publication of the National Implementation Plan. I look forward to the targets outlined in the National Implementation Plan being reached by the end of this year. I wrote to each local authority on 26 February to recognise the progress made on Housing First to date, to stress the importance that that national targets are met, and to confirm that the expansion of the programme from 2022 for the years

ahead will be announced later this year.

The Programme for Government commits to the further expansion of Housing First. Research is currently being undertaken by the Housing Agency to carry out an assessment of need for the supports provided by Housing First. This will inform the expansion of the Programme which I expect to announce later this year, in advance of the expiration of the current National Implementation Plan.

### **Social and Affordable Housing**

368. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the current position regarding the household means policy review; if open consultation will be allowed as part of the review in order to receive submissions from the public, civil society and housing campaign groups; the estimated timeframe for when the review will be completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12521/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** Applications for social housing support are assessed by the relevant local authority, in accordance with the eligibility and need criteria set down in section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the associated Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011, as amended.

The 2011 Regulations prescribe maximum net income limits for each local authority, in different bands according to the area concerned, with income being defined and assessed according to a standard Household Means Policy.

Under the Household Means Policy, which applies in all local authorities, net income for social housing assessment is defined as gross household income less income tax, PRSI, Universal Social Charge and Pension-Related Deductions within the meaning of Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act 2009. The Policy provides for a range of income disregards, and local authorities also have discretion to decide to disregard income that is temporary, short-term or once-off in nature.

As part of the broader social housing reform agenda, a review of the Household Means Policy has been undertaken by officials in my Department. No formal public consultation process is envisaged. I would expect to be in a position to make a decision on proposed amendments to the Policy in due course.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

369. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if adoption of a home to permit homeworking is deemed essential work during level 5 restrictions. [12566/21]

**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).

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.

### **Housing Assistance Payment**

370. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if consideration will be given to the housing assistance payment limit when a tenant finds accommodation that may be just outside the county boundary, for example, Clonee, Dublin 15 (details supplied). [12574/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Under the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) scheme, tenants source their own accommodation in the private rented market. The accommodation sourced by tenants should be within the prescribed maximum HAP rent limits, which are based on household size and the rental market within the area concerned.

Guidelines on inter authority movement were issued to local authorities to facilitate the movement of HAP households from one local authority area to another in cases where a HAP tenant wishes to access rented accommodation, with HAP support, in another local authority area. Inter authority movement is, however, subject to certain conditions, such as the relevant Social Housing Income Eligibility Bands and confirmation that the applicant's income is below the threshold in the new local authority.

HAP tenants that avail of inter authority movement continue to be dealt with by their originating local authority. However, the rent limits applicable are those that apply in the local authority where the property is situated.

Each local authority has statutory discretion to agree to a HAP payment up to 20% above the prescribed maximum rent limit in circumstances where it is necessary, because of local rental market conditions, to secure appropriate accommodation for a household that requires it. It is a matter for the local authority to determine if the application of the flexibility is warranted on a case by case basis. Additional discretion of up to 50% above rent limits is available to assist in housing homeless households in the Dublin Region only.

### **Agriculture Schemes**

371. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the farm plan for designated areas will be available to all farmers in the 2021 Shannon Callows season; the amount available for this plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12592/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** My Department recognises the positive role that farming can play in addressing biodiversity loss. The NPWS Farm Plan Scheme operates nationally, target-

ing various habitats and species by working proactively with farmers to go above and beyond their statutory requirements.

While there is no specific ‘Shannon Callows Farm Plan Scheme’, a number of farmers in the Shannon Callows have participated in the Scheme, with the objective of managing proactively for meadows and grasslands, Corncrake and breeding waders.

Since 2007, the National Parks & Wildlife has invested over €2.5 million by way of payments to farmers in the Shannon Callows. When the budget for the NPWS Farm Plan Scheme was curtailed in 2010, all existing farm plan contracts were honoured by my Department and, in advance of GLAS opening in 2015, my Department worked closely with the Department of Agriculture, Food & the Marine to prioritise entry to that Scheme for farmers in the Shannon Callows.

There are currently 14 NPWS Farm Plans for the Shannon Callows, which is the largest number of NPWS Farm Plans active in any one designated area. An open call will be announced shortly for farmers to apply for the NPWS Farm Plan Scheme and farmers in the Shannon Callows are eligible to apply. Applications are made as part of a competitive process and there can be no guarantee of entry in 2021 as the scheme is subject to an overall limited budget.

I have secured additional funding for the Scheme in 2021.

### **Land Development Agency**

372. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage further to Parliamentary Question No. 310 of 24 February 2021, the reason the response did not include an update on the involvement of the Land Development Agency in the Colbert Lands, Limerick and Strand Road, Galway; if the involvement of the Agency in these sites will be clarified; the way in which it differs to its involvement in the nine sites list in the response; and if the Agency plans to seek SDZ designation for either or both of these sites subsequent to the passing of the Land Development Agency Bill 2021. [12606/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** The Land Development Agency (LDA) was established on an interim basis in September 2018, by way of an Establishment Order made under the Local Government Services (Corporate Bodies) Act 1971, pending the enactment of the Land Development Agency Bill.

On establishment, the LDA had access to an initial tranche of 8 sites and is also working in partnership with Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council on the development of a site at Shanganagh. In addition, the LDA is also working on masterplanning sites in partnership with relevant local authorities and other public bodies. These sites were not included in the response to Parliamentary Question No. 310 of 24 February 2021 as these sites are not as advanced in the planning process as the other nine sites and are medium term development opportunities. These sites include the Colbert Station Quarter site in Limerick and the Sandy Road site in Galway.

The LDA have advised my Department that they are working with Limerick City and County Council, CIE and the HSE to prepare a Masterplan for the state owned lands in the Colbert Station Quarter. The Masterplan will explore the potential of the site to deliver on the aspirations of national and regional planning policy and provide a mixed use development. Once complete, the LDA will carry out a public consultation on the Draft Masterplan.

The LDA ran a design review of the Sandy Road Regeneration Project in partnership with

Galway City Council. A procurement process to appoint a design team to prepare a detailed Masterplan is due to commence shortly. This Masterplan will explore the potential to deliver an affordable housing led mixed use regeneration of a strategic site on Sandy Road in Galway City.

Once the masterplanning process for both of these sites is complete, the LDA will continue to work with key partners on both sites to explore and agree the best method to activate the sites, including bringing forward development sites for planning approval and subsequent development. This process will include examining the potential for the designation of either site as a Strategic Development Zone (SDZ).

### **Local Authority Functions**

373. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he has engaged with Dublin City Council regarding the proposed white-water rafting centre at George's Dock; his views on whether a public facility such as a lido would be more appropriate in the space; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12611/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** As part of its successful multifaceted North Inner City Concept Area 1 proposal under Call 2 of the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF), Dublin City Council sought funding support for the development of a White Water Rafting Facility in George's Dock. While significant URDF funding was provisionally approved for a number of elements of the wider proposal the White Water Rafting element was not successful in securing URDF support.

Any plans for the further advancement of this or any other proposed development for George's Dock is a matter for Dublin City Council.

### **Irish Water**

374. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the situation of the service level agreement between Irish Water and local authority workers will be clarified; the number of workers covered by the agreement; the number of workers who have been requested to transfer fully to Irish Water to date; if his attention has been drawn to the number of workers who do not wish to transfer; the plans of his Department and Irish Water to deal with the number who do not wish to transfer; if the workers will be guaranteed their current conditions if they remain with the relevant local authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12625/21]

415. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if it will be ensured those local authority staff members currently seconded to Irish Water will not have to transfer permanently to Irish Water without their agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13455/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 374 and 415 together.

The Programme for Government provides that the Government will retain Irish Water in public ownership as a national, standalone, regulated utility.

The realisation of this commitment will complete the broad policy and legislative reforms which have seen the public water system embark on a journey of transformation, from a structure based on locally-organised water services authorities, towards a single, national, water

utility. This has been a complex and challenging process for key stakeholders, notably the workers, who include approximately 3,200 local authority water services staff who are subject to service level agreement arrangements with Irish Water as well as a smaller number of staff employed directly by Irish Water and Ervia, together with their trade union representatives, the local government sector, and Ervia/Irish Water.

In keeping with the Programme for Government commitment, the Government recently approved a Policy Paper entitled Irish Water - Towards a national, publicly-owned, regulated water services utility which is now available on my Department's website at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/06326-water-sector-transformation-policy-paper/>. The Policy Paper sets out the Government's expectations and views in relation to the next phase of the Water Sector Transformation Programme, including those matters raised in the questions.

By setting out its views and expectations in this way, the Government is enabling stakeholders to engage meaningfully in the change process which will give them the strongest possible say in determining their own future working arrangements. I have written to the Workplace Relations Commission on 3 March 2021 asking them to contact the parties to arrange to recommence engagement on a Framework for the future delivery of water services. The Government believes it will be possible to reach a collective agreement which addresses the interests and concerns of all parties.

### **Planning Issues**

375. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the necessary local authority planning permission requests that persons need to apply for in order to be able to work from home or to operate their business from home; and if there has been an increase in these application in the previous 12 months. [12647/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** A wide range of exemptions from planning permission are already provided for under 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). Such exemptions are provided for when they are considered to be consistent with proper planning and sustainable development.

Under Class 1 of Schedule 2 of the Regulations, an extension to an existing house up to a limit of 40 square metres is exempted development, with additional conditions and limitations set out in the Regulations.

Class 3 of Schedule 2 of the Regulations provides for a further exemption in respect of the construction, erection or placing within the curtilage of a house of any tent, awning, shade or other object, greenhouse, garage, store, shed or other similar structure. Similarly, this exemption is also subject to conditions and limitations as set out in the Regulations, including that it should be for the sole purpose of being incidental to the enjoyment of the house.

It should be noted that the exemptions outlined are for the sole use of the home owner and not, for example, for the purpose of facilitating the establishment of a commercial enterprise. Such development would be classed as a material change of use - i.e. a change of use of a property from residential use to commercial use - and would therefore require planning permission. An application for such permission provides an opportunity for members of the public to make submissions or observations in respect of the proposed development while also providing the planning authority with the opportunity to consider a range of potential impacts of, such as in-

creased traffic, in the area that may result from any such proposed change of use.

If a person wishes to establish whether or not planning permission is required for a specific development proposal, they can seek a declaration from their local authority under Section 5 of the Act.

Arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, it is likely that there will be an increase in the number of home offices incorporated within existing house structures, being the subject of home extensions or of being incorporated in separate new structures within the curtilage of a house. Planning statistics are compiled by each planning authority on an annual basis for collation and publication on my Department's website at the following link:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/service/9e4ee-get-planning-statistics/>

However, these statistics do not include home office/business related information. The Deputy may wish to contact his local planning authority in relation to trends on the number of planning applications being submitted for this form of development in the area concerned.

### **Social and Affordable Housing**

376. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the provision of social housing at a location (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12650/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) are making an important contribution to social housing delivery, as envisaged under current Government policy. My Department operates a number of funding programmes that assist local authorities to work in partnership with AHBs to construct, purchase and lease new homes and make them available for social housing. One such programme, that AHBs progress construction projects through, is the Capital Advance Loan Facility (CALF)

CALF funding is capital support provided to AHBs by local authorities to facilitate the funding of construction, acquisition or refurbishment of new social housing units. This loan facility can support up to 30% of the eligible capital cost of the housing project, with the housing units provided to local authorities for social housing use under long-term lease arrangements known as Payment and Availability Agreements. A nominal interest rate of 2% fixed per annum is charged by the local authority on the initial capital amount. Repayments on either the capital or interest are not required during the term of the loan (between 10 and 30 years), although where an AHB chooses to, repayments can be made during the term. At the end of the term, the outstanding capital amount plus the interest accrued, is owed and repayable to the local authority. The local authority issues the CALF monies to the AHB and the local authority, in turn, recoups same from my Department.

There is a housing project comprising 35 high-quality homes for social housing use, that is being progressed by the AHB, Respond, in the location referred to, working in partnership with Kildare County Council. I can confirm that my Department issued a CALF approval for this construction project in May 2020. This project has an indicative completion date of December 2022. As with all construction projects in the current COVID 19 climate, delivery programmes and timelines are under constant review.

My Department publishes a quarterly Social Housing Construction Projects Status Report, which sets out the continuing progress being made in advancing the national local authority

and AHB new-build pipeline. The latest report, setting out the position at end Q4 2020, can be accessed at the following weblink:

<https://rebuildingireland.ie/news/minister-obrien-publishes-2020-social-housing-statistics/>

### Social and Affordable Housing

377. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount of funding his Department has provided to voluntary housing associations based in County Kildare to maintain and upgrade their social housing stock over the past three years by AHB, location and amount in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12651/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department operates a number of funding programmes that assist local authorities to work in partnership with Approved Housing Bodies to construct, purchase or lease new homes and make them available for social housing.

This funding is underpinned by either mortgage agreements, capital advance agreements, leases or Payment & Availability agreements, which set out the terms and conditions of the funding and the specific responsibilities the Approved Housing Body has for the properties and their tenants.

Where an Approved Housing Body has purchased or constructed a property that is in their ownership, the responsibility for management and maintenance of that property is a matter for them to meet, in most cases, from their own income. This income is derived, in the main, from a combination of rent payments from the tenant and monthly payments made by the local authority to the Approved Housing Bodies in accordance with a Payment & Availability agreement which is in place for each of these properties.

The main area in which specific management and maintenance fees are provided to Approved Housing Bodies relates to properties delivered via the now closed Capital Loan & Subsidy Scheme (CLSS). The table below sets out the funding made available by my Department to Kildare County Council over the last 3 years, for provision to Approved Housing Bodies for the management and maintenance of their CLSS-funded properties.

AHB	Housing Scheme	Funding 2018 to 2020
CILL DARA HOUSING COMPANY LIMITED	BISHOPSLAND - PHASE 1	€19,548
CILL DARA HOUSING COMPANY LIMITED	BISHOPSLAND - PHASE 3	€71,676
CILL DARA HOUSING COMPANY LIMITED	LOUGHMINANE GREEN, KILDARE	€22,806
CILL DARA HOUSING COMPANY LIMITED	BISHOPSLAND - PHASE 2	€45,612
CILL DARA HOUSING COMPANY LIMITED	ROWANVILLE, KILDARE TOWN	€1,629
CILL URNAI HOUSING ASSOCIATION LTD	KILDANGAN	€19,548
CILL URNAI HOUSING ASSOCIATION LTD	KILBERRY, ATHY	€22,806
CIRCLE VOLUNTARY HOUSING ASSOCIATION LIMITED	BEECH PARK, LEIXLIP	€31,494
CLANMIL HOUSING ASSOCIATION IRELAND LIMITED	EASTON ROAD, LEIXLIP	€34,752
DROICHEAD NUA HOUSING ASSOCIATION	MORRISTOWNBILLER, NEWBRIDGE	€9,774
GOODWILL HOUSING CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY LIMITED	HAWTHORNS, MILLFIELD MANOR, NEWBRIDGE	€19,548
GOODWILL HOUSING CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY LIMITED	RICKARDSTOWN, NEWBRIDGE	€28,236
HILLSIDE VIEW VOL HOUSING ASSOC	BISHOPSLAND	€17,376
MONASTEREVIN HOUSING ASSOC LTD	FERNSBRIDGE, MONASTEREVIN	€7,602

AHB	Housing Scheme	Funding 2018 to 2020
MONASTEREVIN HOUSING ASSOC LTD	COWPASTURE, MONASTEREVAN	€10,860
RATHANGAN HOUSING ASSOCIATION	RATHANGAN DEMESNE, RATHANGAN	€7,602
RESPOND VOLUNTARY HOUSING AGENCY	ARDREW, ATHY	€29,322
RESPOND VOLUNTARY HOUSING AGENCY	EASTON RD., LEIXLIP	€45,612
RESPOND VOLUNTARY HOUSING AGENCY	FLINTERS FIELD, ATHY	€71,676
RESPOND VOLUNTARY HOUSING AGENCY	BALLYMAKEALY, CELBRIDE	€19,548
SUNCROFT HOUSING ASSOCIATION LTD	SUNCROFT	€17,376

### Social and Affordable Housing

378. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the current review status of income eligibility for social housing supports in each local authority and in particular, Cork County Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12673/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Applications for social housing support are assessed by the relevant local authority, in accordance with the eligibility and need criteria set down in section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the associated Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011, as amended.

The 2011 Regulations prescribe maximum net income limits for each local authority, in different bands according to the area concerned, with income being defined and assessed according to a standard Household Means Policy. The 2011 Regulations do not provide local authorities with any discretion to exceed the limits that apply to their administrative areas.

Under the Household Means Policy, which applies in all local authorities, net income for social housing assessment is defined as gross household income less income tax, PRSI, Universal Social Charge and Pension-Related Deductions within the meaning of Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act 2009. The Policy provides for a range of income disregards, and local authorities also have discretion to decide to disregard income that is temporary, short-term or once-off in nature.

The income bands are expressed in terms of a maximum net income threshold for a single-person household, with an allowance of 5% for each additional adult household member, subject to a maximum allowance under this category of 10%; and 2.5% for each child, subject to a maximum allowance under this category of 10%.

The income bands and the authority area assigned to each band were based on an assessment of the income needed to provide for a household's basic needs, plus a comparative analysis of the local rental cost of housing accommodation across the country. It is important to note that the limits introduced in 2011 also reflected a blanket increase of €5,000 introduced prior to the new system coming into operation, in order to broaden the base from which social housing tenants are drawn, both promoting sustainable communities and also providing a degree of future-proofing.

Given the cost to the State of providing social housing, it is considered prudent and fair to direct resources to those most in need of social housing support. The current income eligibility requirements generally achieve this, providing for a fair and equitable system of identifying those households facing the greatest challenge in meeting their accommodation needs from their own resources.

However, as part of the broader social housing reform agenda, a review of income eligibility for social housing supports in each local authority area is underway. The review will have regard to current initiatives being brought forward in terms of affordability and cost rental and will be completed when the impacts of these parallel initiatives have been considered.

### **Architects Register**

379. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the recognition of architectural technologists alongside other disciplines in the built environment (details supplied); if he plans to put the recognition on a statutory footing; and if so, the timeline for same to be delivered. [12712/21]

380. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the process to implement the architectural technologists' register on a statutory footing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12771/21]

381. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when he plans to grant approval to an organisation (details supplied) to commence operating a shadow register of the planned architectural technologists' register; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12772/21]

382. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the progress on implementing the architectural technologists' register on the necessary statutory footing (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12780/21]

386. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to implement an architectural technologists' register including the process to approve committees and boards for the proposed shadow register; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12857/21]

390. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the progress which has been made on the process to implement the architectural technology register on a statutory footing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12942/21]

411. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the process to place the architectural technologists' register on a statutory footing; the timeline for the implementation of the register; the reason for the delay in implementation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13409/21]

417. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the register for architectural technicians. [13462/21]

420. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will accelerate the steps required to place the architectural technologists' register on a statutory footing; and the status of progress in relation to same. [13539/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 379 to 382, inclusive, 386, 390, 411, 417 and 420 together.

In general, the regulation of professions is in the first instance a matter for industry representatives working in consultation with relevant industry stakeholders. My Department has been engaging with the Chartered Institute of Architectural Technologists (CIAT) in relation to the registration of Architectural Technologists. In this regard, CIAT has identified that its preferred

route is to set up a stand-alone register for Architectural Technologists. As such, it is now a matter for CIAT to set up a register on an administrative basis in keeping with registers already in place for other professional groupings under the Building Control Act 2007 and in consultation with the relevant industry stakeholders. CIAT have been advised that the register should be in place for a sufficient period of time to demonstrate that it operates effectively in accordance with the provisions of the Act.

Following this process, my Department will review the register and subject to this review, will then consider bringing forward legislative proposals to place it on a statutory basis. CIAT have been advised of the process required to publish primary legislation.

It is also worth noting that, depending on their personal background and experience, it may be open to persons who are Architectural Technologists, and who possess the requisite experience and competence in the design of buildings, to seek inclusion on either of the statutory registers in respect of Architects or Building Surveyors. A number of Architectural Technologists have already succeeded in gaining inclusion on the statutory registers to date and are thus in a position to act as Design Certifiers and Assigned Certifiers.

*Questions Nos. 381 and 382 answered with Question No. 379.*

### **Defective Building Materials**

383. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will carry out an urgent review of the financial assistance offered by the State under the defective concrete blocks grant scheme, based on the applications received to date by Donegal County Council, and address the serious concerns of affected families across the county. [12800/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks in Construction (Remediation) (Financial Assistance) Regulations 2020 came in to operation on 31 January 2020 and the resulting Defective Concrete Blocks Grant scheme has been open for applications since the end of June 2020. The scheme was informed by the work of an Expert Panel and the current maximum grant amounts payable under the scheme were finalised in consultation with the Office of the Attorney General and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. This process also took account of the comprehensive engagement that took place between my Department and both Donegal and Mayo County Councils, who operate and administer the scheme.

As the application process only opened in June 2020 it would be premature to consider or make any changes to the scheme at this time. I am keeping progress on the scheme under review and engaging with both local authorities and local action groups on the matter.

### **Defective Building Materials**

384. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he and the Minister for Finance will convene a forum meeting with the banks and financial institutions to request that they immediately play a partnership role with the State and affected families in the financial challenge of making homes safe across counties Donegal and Mayo under the defective concrete blocks grant scheme. [12801/21]

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

met recently with members of the Donegal Mica Action Group and one of the issues raised was that of finance and the potential role which banks could play in assisting affected homeowners. As oversight of the financial institutions is outside the scope and remit of my Department, I undertook to and have written to the Minister for Finance, on the matter.

### **Defective Building Materials**

385. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if financial allocations from his Department to Donegal County Council to enable it to make homes within its housing stock affected by MICA defective concrete blocks safe will be additional to the planned financial allocations to Donegal County Council to facilitate the construction and purchase of new public housing across the county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12816/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Section 58 of the Housing Act 1966 provides that management and maintenance is a matter for each individual local authority. This includes maintenance programmes and carrying out responsive, planned and pre-letting repairs.

Notwithstanding this, my Department also provides financial support to local authorities under various targeted: social housing stock upgrade programmes; large-scale urban regeneration programmes; support for the return of vacant units to productive use; the Energy Retrofitting Programme; and, adaptations and extensions for people with disability in social housing.

My Department also provides separate capital funding in respect of the Social Housing Investment Programme, to all local authorities, including Donegal County Council, for the delivery of new social homes via their social housing construction programme, through turnkey arrangements and through acquisitions.

In respect of local authority housing stock in Donegal impacted by defective concrete blocks, further evaluation of the issue is being undertaken by Donegal County Council. The outcome of this evaluation will be the subject of a submission by Donegal County Council to my Department. Once this is received my Department will, in consultation with Donegal County Council, consider the matter.

*Question No. 386 answered with Question No. 379.*

### **Home Loan Scheme**

387. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme is open to applicants who work less than 20 hours per week or are lone parents and in receipt of the one parent family payment. [12885/21]

388. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a person can apply for both the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme and the enhanced help-to-buy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12886/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 387 and 388 together.

Those who are currently in receipt of the One Parent Family Payment are not precluded from applying for the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan however they must meet all other eligibil-

ity criteria for the scheme.

There are no set minimum income limits; however, applicants do need to have sufficient borrowing and repayment capacity and must be capable of repaying the mortgage in accordance with the statutory credit policy underpinning the loan. Applicants must also be of good credit standing; and have a satisfactory credit record.

The Housing Agency provides a central credit assessment service to local authorities and credit checks are undertaken as part of the credit assessment process. The final decision on loan approval is a matter for the relevant local authority and its credit committee on a case-by-case basis. Decisions on all housing loan applications must be made in accordance with the statutory credit policy that underpins the scheme, in order to ensure prudence and consistency in approaches in the best interests of both borrowers and the lending local authorities.

For prospective purchasers of newly-built properties, the availability, through the Revenue Commissioners, of the Help to Buy Initiative for first-time buyers may provide additional assistance to prospective applicants for the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan.

### Home Loan Scheme

389. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of successful applicants who have applied in each year of the operation of the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme. [12887/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Help to Buy (HTB) incentive was introduced in 2017. The measure is scheduled to expire on 31 December 2021.

Revenue provide monthly and annual statistics on the scheme (available at: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/tax-expenditures/index.aspx>).

The table following summarises approved claims for each year since the inception of the scheme until end 2020 (the latest date for which data are available).

2017	2018	2019	2020
4812*	4957	6713	6227

\* The 2017 figure includes approved retrospective claims made in 2017 in respect of the period 19 July 2016 to end 2016, as provided for in the relevant legislation.

*Question No. 390 answered with Question No. 379.*

### Departmental Internships

391. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under his aegis in 2019; the cost in terms of wages and allowances; and the estimated numerical capacity of State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis. [12958/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The requested information is not available in my Department. It may be requested directly from the State bodies under the aegis of my Department upon application to the e-mail addresses set out in tabular form below.

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

### Covid-19 Pandemic

392. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage further to Parliamentary Question No. 210 of 20 January 2021, if additional construction sites have been given approval to remain open during the current level 5 restrictions over and above those indicated; if so, the number of sites by local authority area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13016/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I refer to my reply to Parliamentary Questions No. 70 and 71 of 4 March 2021. The position is unchanged.

### Social and Affordable Housing

393. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of social housing units completed during the level 5 lockdown by local authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13017/21]

**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). Under the Regulations, certain social housing projects which meet the criteria set out in the Regulations may continue. The Housing Agency

is maintaining a register of social housing projects which have been designated as essential.

My Department publishes comprehensive programme level statistics on a quarterly basis on all social housing delivery activity. This is published on the statistics page of my Department's website, at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/6d316-local-authority-housing-scheme-statistics/>. Details of social housing units completed as designated essential projects will be published in the reports for Quarter 1 2021 and Quarter 2 2021 in due course.

### Shared Ownership Scheme

394. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reviews that have taken place since 2011 on the performance of the shared ownership scheme; the person or body that conducted the reviews; if he will provide links to the reports commissioned by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13018/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** A review of the shared ownership scheme was undertaken by the Housing Agency in 2013 and is available at the following address:

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-10\\_pq394-10-03-21\\_en.pdf](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-10_pq394-10-03-21_en.pdf).

### Public Sector Staff

395. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the persons or grades of persons in the civil and public service and other employments who are prohibited from standing for election to local authorities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13034/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** Section 13 of the Local Government Act 2001 provides for disqualifications from local authority membership. This includes, under Section 13(1)(g), a member of An Garda Síochána or a wholetime member of the Defence Forces.

Section 13(1)(h) provides that a civil servant who is not by terms of employment expressly permitted to be a member of a local authority shall be disqualified from local authority membership. The Department of Finance circular 09/2009 Civil Servant and Political Activity (ref E109/33/09) clarifies that civil servants in the craft, state industrial and manual grades and grades below clerical grades or civil servants in the clerical grades and non-industrial grades with salary maxima equal to or below the Clerical Officer maximum may stand for election to local authorities. <https://circulars.gov.ie/pdf/circular/finance/2009/09.pdf>

Section 13(1)(h)(i) of the 2001 Act provides that a person employed by a local authority, the HSE or the Child and Family Agency and is not the holder of a class, description or grade of employment designated by the Minister by order under section 161(1)(b) of the 2001 Act shall also be disqualified from membership of a local authority.

In 2004, the then Minister for Environment, Local Government and Heritage, under Section 161 of the 2001 Act, signed the Local Government Act 2001 (Section 161) Order 2004 which provided that the disqualification set out in Section 13 would not apply in respect of "every class, description or grade of employment the maximum remuneration for which on the last date for receipt of nominations at a local election does not exceed the maximum remuneration

*for the grade of Clerical Officer”* . (Section 161 of the 2001 Act refers to restrictions on local authority employment and membership of a local authority). A circular issued to local authority employees in this regard in May 2009 (ref LG(P) 06/09).

Section 13(1)(h)(ii) of the 2001 Act provides that a person employed by the Health Service Executive and at a grade or of a description of employment designated by order of the Minister for Health and Children shall be disqualified from local authority membership. The making of such an order is a matter for the Minister for Health.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

396. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the oversight arrangements he has put in place with local authorities regarding compliance with level 5 restrictions; the instructions he has issued; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13035/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** Local authorities are entirely independent corporate entities having full responsibility under law for the performance of their functions and the discharge of their governance and other responsibilities. As Minister, I have responsibility for policy, legislation, Oireachtas accountability and, at a broad level, oversight, in respect of the local government system and in relation to some but not all functions and services of local authorities.

Adherence to the current public health restrictions by and within local authorities is a matter for each Chief Executive. However, the County and City Management Association (CCMA) has worked very closely with a range of Government Departments over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic and, supported by a range of Standard Operating Guidances, it has coordinated the ongoing safe operation of most local authority functions and services even during the current restrictions. A local authority services framework sets out how local authorities will deliver their services under the different restriction levels set out under the Plan for Living with COVID-19 and this document can be found online at <https://www.lgma.ie/en/publications/local-authority-sector-reports/local-authority-services-framework-for-future-covid-19-response.pdf>

My Department liaises with the CCMA on a range of key functions that continue to be delivered by safely by local authorities during the current restrictions. Indeed, our local authorities have expanded services and increased activity in crucial areas such as community support, enterprise and economic development, and planning and public realm activities since the outset of the pandemic and I wish to compliment them for their unstinting work over the past year.

### **Local Authority Funding**

397. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the funding provided to Dublin City Council for retrofitting council properties 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. [13069/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** My Department has provided funding support to local authorities for energy efficiency retrofitting works under the Social Housing Energy Efficiency Retrofitting Programme since 2013 and under the Voids Programme over the period 2014 – 2019. The provision of funding for energy efficiency upgrades in the local authority housing stock will continue under the Governments

National Retrofitting Plan.

Budget 2021 provided funding support of €65 million for a newly revised Energy Efficiency Programme, which has been designed around the Programme for Government commitment, with a significant increase in funding support. This programme will see a significant upscaling on what has been completed by local authorities in previous years and will target 2,400 social homes to be upgraded to a Building Energy Rating (BER) of B2 or cost optimal level in 2021.

Over the period 2015-2020 the Energy Efficiency Retrofit Programme has seen €103 million in funding being provided to local authorities for the upgrade and retrofit of social housing stock, of which Dublin City Council has received just over €20 million. Under the Voids programme Dublin City Council has received over €13.5 million towards energy efficiency works. These figures do not include homes which were returned to productive use by Dublin City Council using funding from its own resources.

Requests for funding for 2021 are currently awaited from local authorities by my Department. The table attached sets out the funding provided to Dublin city Council as requested.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-10\_pq397-10-03-21\_en.docx">SSHA</a>]

### Local Authority Rates

398. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will consider extending the current waiver on local authority commercial rates for tourism and hospitality businesses until the end of 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13127/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** In order to continue supporting businesses and ratepayers, and in recognition of the ongoing impacts of COVID 19 and the associated public health restrictions, the Government put in place a commercial rates waiver for the first three months of 2021 and recently extended it for a further three months. The waiver applies to businesses most seriously affected by ongoing restrictions, with automatic eligibility extending 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 with all public health measures and associated supports, the waiver of commercial rates will be kept under review.

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.

### Property Registration Authority

399. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address the delays in registrations with the Property Registration Authority, PRA, which are now causing sales to fall through. [13180/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** On foot of the restrictions introduced by the Government on 30 December 2020, the Property Registration Authority (PRA) implemented its Business Continuity Plan Level 5 response for the continued provision of essential services. The PRA is operating

a high level of service, with all services remaining available, excluding public counter access. In February 2021, 17,388 Land Registry transactions were registered.

Applications for registration are dealt with in order of priority. However, I am informed that urgent applications will continue to be processed expeditiously upon request, on a case-by-case basis.

### **Local Authority Rates**

400. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will extend the local authority commercial rates waiver until the end of December 2021; his views on the hotel sector statement that the average local authority rate is €1,500 per bedroom and is therefore a sizeable contribution to overhead costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13240/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** In order to continue supporting businesses and ratepayers, and in recognition of the ongoing impacts of COVID 19 and the associated public health restrictions, the Government has put in place a commercial rates waiver for the first half of 2021. It applies to businesses most seriously affected by ongoing 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.

Local authorities are required by law to levy rates on any property used for commercial purposes, in accordance with the details entered in the valuation lists prepared by the independent Commissioner of Valuation under the Valuation Acts 2001 to 2015. The rates liability of a property is determined by multiplying the valuation of that property, which is set by the Valuation Office, by the Annual Rate on Valuation (ARV). The ARV is decided by the elected members of each local authority as part of the annual budget and its determination is a reserved function.

As has been the case since the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the 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.

### **Land Development Agency**

401. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the tenure breakdown for each of the nine sites the Land Development Agency, LDA, is currently working on; and the percentage of proposed homes to be social rental, affordable cost rental, affordable purchase and open market sale in tabular form. [13313/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** The Land Development Agency (LDA) was established on an interim basis in September 2018, by way of an Establishment Order made under the Local Government Services (Corporate Bodies) Act 1971, pending the enactment of the Land Development Agency Bill.

On establishment, the LDA had access to an initial tranche of 8 sites that have near term delivery potential for approximately 3,400 new homes. As these 8 sites are currently at the

pre-planning stage, the exact delivery potential for each site will only be finalised as final plans are put in place and planning permission is sought. The LDA will have regard to Government policy, and all appropriate legislation, on the appropriate tenure mix for developments on public land as well as the criteria for the operation of cost rental and affordable housing schemes.

In partnership with Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council, the LDA has been granted planning permission for the development of 597 homes on a further site in Shanganagh. Approximately 34% of the units will be for social housing, 51% will be cost rental and 15% will be for affordable purchase.

### Social and Affordable Housing

402. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the breakdown by local authority of long term leasing and long term leased Part V approvals for 2018, 2019 and 2020; the annual cost of each lease; the lease review period in each case; the length of each lease; and if the property remains in private ownership at the end of the lease term or ownership transfers to the local authority or AHB, in tabular form. [13314/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Data in relation to leased dwellings, and dwellings delivered under Part V, in each of the years 2018 - 2020, broken down by local authority, is published on my Department's website at the following link:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordble/overall-social-housing-provision>.

My Department does not publish details of individual homes; however, the average annual cost of leased dwellings delivered by each local authority for 2018 - 2020 is set out in Table 1 below. The average cost is calculated based on claims for operational new units submitted by local authorities and recorded on my Department's Social Housing Current Expenditure Programme financial management system at year-end 2020 and does not necessarily represent the amount claimed or paid in respect of that period. The average duration of leases delivered by local authorities 2018 - 2020 is set out in Table 2.

**Table 1: Leasing - Average Annual Cost of Dwellings Delivered 2018 - 2020**

Local Authority	Average Annual Cost of Dwellings Delivered in 2018	Average Annual Cost of Dwellings Delivered in 2019	Average Annual Cost of Dwellings Delivered in 2020
Carlow	€6152	€7455	€9565
Cavan	€5995	€7030	€7450
Clare	€7686	€8864	€9194
Cork City	€12638	€13565	€13960
Cork County	€12144	€7300	€10050
DLR	€18870	€26595	€18698
Donegal	€6459	€5659	€6250
Dublin City	€14744	€16081	€18605
Fingal	€15108	€15002	€17840
Galway City	€13002	€10470	€N/A
Galway County	€9936	€9543	€8692
Kerry	€8470	€9008	€10223
Kildare	€10241	€11864	€12052
Kilkenny	€8603	€9694	€10322
Laois	€8438	€9264	€9981

Local Authority	Average Annual Cost of Dwellings Delivered in 2018	Average Annual Cost of Dwellings Delivered in 2019	Average Annual Cost of Dwellings Delivered in 2020
Leitrim	€N/A	€7200	€6255
Limerick	€8636	€9998	€10916
Longford	€6242	€7346	€7932
Louth	€12207	€10166	€12396
Mayo	€7547	€8189	€8333
Meath	€10643	€12119	€13267
Monaghan	€6255	€6375	€6373
Offaly	€7916	€8143	€9272
Roscommon	€5342	€8190	€8120
Sligo	€6306	€8480	€6520
South Dublin	€15340	€16575	€17751
Tipperary	€7186	€7374	€8208
Waterford	€6839	€7379	€8343
Westmeath	€8614	€9486	€10299
Wexford	€7049	€8299	€7864
Wicklow	€10539	€13368	€14298

**Table 2: Average Length of Leases Delivered 2018 - 2020**

2018	16 years
2019	18 years
2020	20 years

The number of Part V leases delivered by local authorities from 2018 - 2020 is set out in Table 3. The average annual cost of Part V leases delivered by each local authority from 2018 - 2020 is set out in Table 4. The average annual cost is calculated based on claims for operational new units submitted by local authorities and recorded on my Department's Social Housing Current Expenditure Programme financial management system at year-end 2020 and does not necessarily represent the amount claimed or paid in respect of that period. The average duration of Part V Leases delivered by local authorities from 2018 - 2020 is set out in Table 5.

**Table 3: Number of Part V Leases Delivered 2018 - 2020**

Local Authority	2018	2019	2020
Dublin City	6	4	12
Kilkenny	2	0	0
Tipperary	1	0	0
DLR	0	9	0
Westmeath	0	1	0
Kerry	0	0	1
South Dublin	0	0	3
Total	9	14	16

**Table 4: Average Annual Cost of Part V Leases Delivered 2018 - 2020**

Local Authority	Average Annual Cost of Dwellings delivered in 2018	Average Annual Cost of Dwellings delivered in 2019	Average Annual Cost of Dwellings delivered in 2020
Dublin City	€16320	€16320	€17155
Kilkenny	€11520	N/A	N/A
Tipperary	€8400	N/A	N/A
DLR	N/A	€28310	N/A
Westmeath	N/A	€5270	N/A
Kerry	N/A	N/A	N/A
South Dublin	N/A	N/A	€18530

**Table 5: Average Length of Part V Leases Delivered 2018 - 2020**

2018	13 years
2019	20 years
2020	24 years

With the exception of dwellings delivered under the Approved Housing Body Mortgage to Rent Scheme and National Asset Residential Property Services programme, ownership of all leased dwellings will revert to the private owner at the end of the lease term. The relevant local authority may seek to renew the lease or acquire the property at the end of the lease term. In general, rent reviews take place 3 years from the commencement date of the lease and every 3 years thereafter, with reference to the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices.

The average annual cost of Part V leases set out in Table 4 is based on the average full year cost of the Part V lease agreements entered into by the relevant local authority in that year and does not necessarily represent the amount claimed or paid in respect of that period. In a Part V leased unit, the lease payment can vary depending on how the equivalent net monetary value has been reflected in the agreement. This is usually achieved by either a rent free period up front or a discount on the lease payment over the term of the lease (or part thereof). Where a rent free period is negotiated in respect of Part V units, no amount will be claimed or paid in respect of the units for that period.

### National Monuments

403. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the breakdown of the total expenditure of €4.48 million for the conservation, protection and restoration of the national monument buildings at Nos. 14-17 Moore Street; the amount spent on project management, architectural and engineering supervision, security, quantity surveying services and so on in tabular form; and the reason the stated objective to have the 1916 commemorative centre at least partially open to the public in time for the centenary of the Rising was not realised. [13326/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** I refer the Deputy to the reply to Parliamentary Question No 120 of 18 February 2021. I am advised that it would not be appropriate at this stage to provide additional disaggregation of these costs on the grounds that they are commercially sensitive and that any such disclosure now would not be conducive to securing an optimal economic outcome to future procurement arrangements for the completion of the project.

As the Deputy will be aware, the works on the conservation and restoration of the national monument buildings were disrupted in early 2016, for some period of time. Arising from legal proceedings in the High Court the Department then ceased the contract apart from completing essential stabilisation and preservation measures approved by the Court itself. These works were not sufficient to allow the buildings to be opened to the public. The High Court judgments were later overturned in all respects by the Court of Appeal in February 2018.

Both Minister O'Brien and I are working closely with all key stakeholders and are keen that the necessary works be completed and that the national monument buildings are open to the public as soon as possible.

### Rental Sector

404. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the financing model for the cost rental scheme currently being piloted by his Department includes 60% loan finance from the Housing Finance Agency or private banks, 30% equity contributed by the State through the cost rental equity loan scheme and 10% contribution from the approved housing body provider; and if this 10% contribution from the provider or approved housing body will take the form of cash or equity. [13338/21]

405. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the way in which the 30% cost rental equity loan will be calculated in future years when the approved housing body reaches the point of having to repay the equity; if it will be passed on the open market value of the property or some other calculation; if there will be an interest charge on the equity loan; if so, the interest; and if it will change over time. [13339/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 404 and 405 together.

On 8 February 2021 I announced that approval in principle had been given for the financing of 390 new homes for Cost Rental under the Cost Rental Equity Loan (CREL) scheme. Allocated €35m in Budget 2021, the CREL scheme will see the Government issue 40-year loans to Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) to cover up to 30% of the capital cost of new homes for Cost Rental. These loans have 1% simple interest, fixed for the lifetime of the loan, and no repayment is required until the end of the loan term, at which point both the principal and the accrued interest will fall due.

Whilst AHBs may invest their own equity, it is anticipated the majority of remaining capital costs will be primarily sourced from long-term commercial debt funding. To this end, the Housing Finance Agency has made available €100m in 40-year loans for CREL-approved projects in 2021, competitively priced at 1.25% interest fixed for the first 30 years.

Following a Call for Proposals and a rigorous assessment process, approval in principle was granted to Clúid, Respond, and Tuath AHBs for CREL funding of 390 new Cost Rental homes in 2021. Precise details of the funded projects, including locations, housing typologies, and cost-covering rents, will be released when the AHBs have completed the financial and commercial arrangements.

### **Seaweed Harvesting**

406. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps open to a seaweed harvester who wishes to register seaweed harvesting rights on their folio which abuts the shoreline from which they harvest seaweed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13342/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** Legal registration of seaweed harvesting rights, such as those held by traditional seaweed harvesters is a matter for the Property Registration Authority of Ireland (PRAI), accordingly, my Department has no role in that process.

Those wishing to register related rights should engage directly with the PRAI who can be contacted at: [www.prai.ie](http://www.prai.ie) .

### **Residential Tenancies Board**

407. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of prosecutions that have been taken by the Residential Tenancies Board in relation to unregistered landlords. [13378/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The information requested is not available in my Department.

The Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) was established as an independent statutory body under the Residential Tenancies Acts 2004-2020, to operate a national tenancy registration system and to facilitate the resolution of disputes between landlords and tenants.

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

### **Housing Policy**

408. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the provisions in place to protect those in multi-occupancies from unsuitable conditions and in particular to prevent two to three-bedroom houses from renovation into large occupancy units of five to ten persons in cramped conditions. [13379/21]

**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 specify requirements in relation to a range of matters, such as structural repair, sanitary facilities, heating, ventilation, natural light, safety of gas, oil and electrical supply and fire. These Regulations apply to all properties let or available for let and are available at <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2019/si/137/made/en/print>

These Regulations do not address the minimum area of a dwelling or any of the rooms contained within.

With very limited exemptions, the regulations apply to all private rented residential accommodation. All landlords have a legal obligation to ensure that their rented properties comply. Responsibility for enforcement of the regulations rests with the relevant local authority.

Local authorities have a strong legislative framework available to them which provides for the issuing of Improvement Notices and Prohibition Notices where landlords are in breach of their obligations. Under Section 34 of that Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1992, any person who fails to comply with an improvement notice or re-lets a house in breach of a prohibition notice, will be guilty of an offence and will be liable, on summary conviction, to a fine not exceeding €5,000 or imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or both.

Part IV of the Housing Act 1966 deals with overcrowding and establishes effective limits on the numbers of people that can occupy the same bedroom. The Act requires, inter alia, that there is at least 400 cubic feet of free air space for each person in a bedroom. Local Authorities are responsible for the enforcement of this legislation.

Under the Act, a housing authority may request information from the owner or occupier

of a house such as will allow that authority to determine if a house can be deemed to be overcrowded, having regard to section 63 of the Act.

Under the Act, a local authority can prohibit the use of an overcrowded dwelling, irrespective of whether it is being let or not, and can serve notice on the owner of a dwelling specifying the maximum number of persons that may occupy it without causing overcrowding. If the owner of a house is causing or permitting the house to be overcrowded, the authority can require the owner to desist from this within a period not exceeding 21 days. Any person who neglects or refuses to comply with these requirements is guilty of an offence and shall be liable on summary conviction to a class C fine not exceeding €2,500 and/or to imprisonment for up to one month.

Overcrowding may give rise to concerns in respect of fire safety, and may lead to enforcement action by fire authorities.

I am committed to empowering local authorities to deal with overcrowding more effectively.

My Department is currently working on proposed legislative changes to the Housing Act 1966 which are designed to strengthen the statutory framework for the enforcement of the Act's overcrowding provisions.

### **Housing Issues**

409. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his attention has been drawn to the concerns of residents living near colleges in relation to the 2021 summer months and the prospect of short-term large occupancy rentals. [13380/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** The Planning and Development Act 2000 (Exempted Development) (No. 2) Regulations 2019 introduced legislative changes in relation to the regulation of the short-term letting sector through the planning code to help address its impact on the supply of private rented accommodation, particularly in urban centres of high housing demand i.e. rent pressure zones (RPZs). The planning system facilitates the regulation of such short-term letting uses undertaken by the individual carrying out the activity, i.e. the owner/occupier of the house or apartment, rather than the online platforms advertising such properties.

The provisions do not generally affect the operation of purpose built student accommodation, for which permissions are typically granted with planning conditions that generally facilitates the use of student accommodation complexes as alternative summer or holiday accommodation but which are reserved as student housing during the academic year. This is on foot of advice provided by my Department to planning authorities, by way of Circular Letter PL8/2016 issued in July 2016, regarding matters to consider in relation to the handling of planning applications for student accommodation. In this regard, the Circular makes it clear that housing for students is a specific and important segment of the overall housing sector with distinct characteristics and requirements. Accordingly, appropriate safeguards are required to ensure that student accommodation is not used as permanent residential accommodation or for other uses and is restricted to the accommodation of students during the academic year.

However, planning authorities were reminded of the need to establish a steady rental income for such student accommodation developments throughout the year in order to ensure the deliverability and viability of student accommodation development projects from a funding perspective and to recognise that such complexes can also play an important role in providing affordable accommodation for tourists and visitors in major urban areas during the peak summer demand periods.

## Building Control Management System

410. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason new housing developments cannot at present be uploaded onto the Building Control Management System; if this can be changed in order that development can recommence promptly once restrictions are lifted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13400/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** Building owners, and builders are responsible for ensuring that buildings or works are carried out in accordance with the requirements of the Building Regulations. Under Article 8 of the Building Control Regulations 1997 – 2020, ‘*A person who intends to carry out any works, or to make a material change of use as regards a building to which this Part applies, shall give, to the building control authority in whose functional area the works or building are, is or will be situated, notice in writing of such intention (in these Regulations referred to as a “commencement notice”) not less than fourteen days and not more than twenty-eight days before the commencement of the works or the making of the material change of use.*’

The Building Control Management System (BCMS) provides a common platform for clear and consistent administration of building control matters across the local authority sector. The BCMS is an IT enabler, set up to facilitate building control authorities, building owners, builders and construction professionals in discharging their separate responsibilities under the Building Control Act 1990.

As Minister, I have no role in the operational matters pertaining to the operation of the BCMS which is managed by the National Building Control Office (NBCO) within Dublin City Council (DCC) as an effective shared service in the 31 Building Control Authorities. The NBCO may be contacted by phone at 01 222 7947/7948 or by email to support@nbco.gov.ie.

Current covid restrictions are set out in the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 10) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 701 of 2020), as amended. *Under these regulations construction is closed with the exception of essential services. An essential service means a service specified in Part 2 of the Schedule to the Principal Regulations. An explanation of what is considered essential in relation to construction and development is available at the following link:*

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c9158-essential-services/#construction-and-development>

Finally, the issues referred to by the Deputy are a matter for local Building Control Authorities, who are independent in the use of their statutory powers under the Building Control Acts 1990 -2020. However, my Department is currently engaging with the relevant authorities with a view to ensuring that development can recommence promptly once restrictions are lifted.

*Question No. 411 answered with Question No. 379.*

## Homeless Persons Supports

412. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if Meath County Council is correct when it states that the National Quality Standards Framework pertains only to services delivered by NGOs and are funded by section 10 homeless funding in view of his recent statement that the framework is being applied to all providers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13442/21]

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

My Department's role in relation to homelessness involves the provision of a national framework of policy, legislation and funding to underpin the role of housing authorities in addressing homelessness at local level. Statutory responsibility in relation to the provision of homeless services rests with individual housing authorities. Section 10 of the Housing Act 1988 sets out the purposes for which costs may be incurred by housing authorities in respect of the provision of homeless accommodation and related services.

All emergency accommodation, whether provided by local authorities, NGOs, voluntary bodies or privately are required to comply with standards and these standards are monitored. The National Quality Standards Framework (NQSF) for homeless services is in place nationally for local authority and NGO delivered services. The Framework was developed to ensure a consistent approach in how local authorities and service providers respond to the needs of those experiencing homelessness and to improve the quality of services provided. In general, the operation of these emergency accommodation facilities is contracted out by local authorities, under service level agreements, to NGOs involved in the delivery of homeless services.

Local authorities also carry out inspections on facilities that are not covered under the Framework. This regime operates in parallel with, and is based on, the NQSF arrangements. Separate to the service standards expected of providers via service level agreements, all homeless service providers must meet the requirements of statutory codes, in particular the requirements of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 and the Fire Services Acts.

### **Social and Affordable Housing**

413. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the average waiting times for approved housing applicants in County Tipperary by local electoral area in tabular form. [13452/21]

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

Details on the number of households qualified for social housing support in each local authority administrative area are provided in the annual statutory Summary of Social Housing Assessments (SSHA).

The most recent summary, conducted in November 2020, shows that 61,880 households were assessed as qualified for and being in need of social housing support. This represents a decrease of 6,813 households or 9.9% on the last assessment in June 2019. Since 2016, the numbers have decreased from 91,600 to 61,880, a reduction of 32.4%.

Below is the link to the summary report for 2020 which includes breakdowns by each local authority, including Tipperary, across a range of categories. SSHA data is collected and collated at local authority level and therefore a breakdown of the numbers by electoral area cannot be provided.

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.

It should be noted that the SSHA is a point in time snapshot of the demand for social housing support in each local authority area and does not necessarily reflect the dynamic nature of entry to and exit from the housing waiting lists.

## 2020 Report

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/970ea-summary-of-social-housing-assessments-2020-key-findings/>

### Housing Assistance Payment

414. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the cost of HAP payments in each local electoral area in County Tipperary over the past five years. [13453/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department does not hold data on Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) tenancies by local electoral area, but rather collects and publishes data by local authority area.

A breakdown of the number of tenancies supported under HAP for the period 2014 to 2020, broken down by local authority, is available on my Department's website at the following link: <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordable/overall-social-housing-provision> .

HAP is a flexible and immediate housing support that is available to all eligible households throughout the State. At end Q4 2020 there were nearly 60,000 households in receipt of HAP and over 33,520 separate landlords and agents providing accommodation to households supported by the scheme. HAP commenced in Tipperary on 29 June 2015 and the total numbers of active HAP tenancies at end Q4 2020 was 1,868. The Q4 2020 average monthly rent paid to landlords under the HAP scheme in Tipperary was €503.69.

In respect of the provision of HAP funding, Limerick City and County Council provides a highly effective HAP transactional shared service on behalf of all local authorities. This HAP Shared Services Centre (SSC) manages all HAP related rental transactions for the tenant, local authority and landlord. Accordingly, my Department does not recoup individual local authorities in respect of HAP rental payments in their administrative areas but, rather, recoups all landlord costs via the HAP SSC.

Data in relation to funding provided by the State for HAP tenancies, broken down by local authority area, can be found on my Department's website at this link:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/6060e-overall-social-housing-provision/#housing-assistance-payment>

This funding represents the portion paid after receipt of the differential rent – that is, the tenant contribution - paid by the tenant to the local authority.

*Question No. 415 answered with Question No. 374.*

### National Economic and Social Council

416. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he has read the recent NESC report on housing. [12564/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** In June 2020, as a precursor to review of the National Development Plan (NDP), the NESC Sec-

retariat were asked by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) to undertake research in relation to the policy options available to facilitate the delivery of public and private housing, in line with the compact growth targets set out in the National Planning Framework and related policies in the Programme for Government.

NESC published a paper in October, *Housing Policy: Actions to Deliver Change*. The report provides useful input on key policy issues for my Department, including examining the current and emergency institutional arrangements, how existing policy instruments could be improved and new policy innovation.

Increasing the supply of private, affordable and social homes is a priority for the Government and for my Department and I welcome the analysis undertaken by NESC in the report. My Department has already taken action on many of the recommendations set out in the report. Other measures are being evaluated in the context of the development of the new housing strategy, 'Housing for All', which I intend to publish this summer.

*Question No. 417 answered with Question No. 379.*

### **Fire Service**

418. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his attention has been drawn to plans to carry out an independent report or analysis of the fire service in Bray, County Wicklow; if so, the details of this proposed analysis; the terms of reference of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13471/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The provision of a fire service in its functional area, including the establishment and maintenance of a fire brigade, the assessment of fire cover needs and the provision of fire station premises is a statutory function of individual fire authorities under the Fire Services Acts, 1981 and 2003. My Department supports the fire authorities through setting general policy, providing a central training programme, issuing guidance on operational and other related matters and providing capital funding for equipment and priority infrastructural projects.

Fire services are provided in Ireland by local authorities in accordance with the provisions of the Fire Services Acts, 1981 and 2003. Under this legislation, there are 31 fire authorities which provide fire prevention and fire protection services for communities through 27 service delivery structures. Local authority fire services are delivered by approximately 3,300 local authority staff engaged at 218 fire stations nationwide, with 16 of these stations being full-time stations, a further 4 are mixed full-time and retained, and 198 retained stations.

My Department was made aware by email in late February 2021 of a proposal to carry out a report/analysis of the provision of fire services in Bray, Co Wicklow. However, it has not been informed of the detail of the proposed analysis or its terms of reference or other documentation in this regard. It is expected that any analysis of fire service provision should have due regard to national standards and guidance set out in the "Keeping Communities Safe" national policy document published in 2013 and take account of support available from adjoining fire services.

### **Fire Service**

419. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the follow-up process that was due to be carried out by the external validation

group commissioned by the management board of the National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management; the scope of the follow-up process; the terms of reference; if the Directorate engaged with Wicklow Fire Service; when a report from the external validation group will be ready; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13472/21]

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

The provision of a fire service in its functional area, including the establishment and maintenance of a fire brigade, the assessment of fire cover needs and the provision of fire station premises, is a statutory function of individual fire authorities under the Fire Services Acts, 1981 and 2003. My Department, primarily through the National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management (NDFEM) supports the fire authorities through setting general policy, providing a central training programme, issuing guidance on operational and other related matters and providing capital funding for equipment and priority infrastructural projects.

Fire services are provided in Ireland by local authorities in accordance with the provisions of the Fire Services Acts, 1981 and 2003. At the moment there are 31 fire authorities which provide fire prevention and fire protection services for communities through 27 service delivery structures. Local authority fire services are delivered by approximately 3,300 local authority staff engaged at 218 fire stations nationwide.

Over the course of 2014/2015, an External Validation Group (EVG), commissioned by the Management Board of the NDFEM, visited every fire service in the country as part of a new external validation process arising from implementation of the “Keeping Communities Safe” national policy document. In April 2016, the Management Board published the first EVG Report titled “Local Delivery - National Consistency”. The findings of that process are available on my Department’s website at the following link:

<http://www.housing.gov.ie/local-government/fire-and-emergency-management/fire-services-ireland-local-delivery-national>

This first EVG report was a welcome benchmark of local authority provision of fire services in Ireland, and reviewed a number of themes. For the first time, it reported on the matching of provision of fire services with assessed fire risk. It reviewed fire safety work and undertook an assessment of the impact of national guidance on safety, health and welfare of staff in fire services. The Report concluded that the public are served well by the locally authority provided fire service arrangements and can retain confidence in the integrity and professionalism of those with responsibility for managing and delivering fire safety and fire services in Ireland.

In May 2019, the Management Board of NDFEM considered a proposal for a second round of external validation, or EVG II. Stakeholder engagement was undertaken in preparation for a thematic review process, which was scheduled to commence in Q1 2020. However, due to Covid-19, the Board made a decision to postpone this process.

As an alternative, the Board mandated staff in the NDFEM to undertake a review of the impact of Covid-19 on local authority fire service resilience and response, as well as on fire safety work and to look at fire services roles in supporting Covid-related emergency management. The objective was to capture issues arising, lessons to be learned and good practice which worked during the first phase of Covid-19 response, so that essential services could continue to be maintained in case of further surges.

This review was undertaken by means of ‘virtual visits’ (i.e. by Webex link) to each of the 27 fire services and three Regional Communications Centres. This ‘virtual’ process was undertaken by an NDFEM team, working in association with Chief Fire Officers and their staff and local authority executives. These visits were undertaken between the 24th of June and the

22nd of September 2020. A composite report on themes related to the impact of Covid-19 on fire services was compiled and presented to the NDFEM Management Board in October 2020.

The position in relation to undertaking an EVG II will be kept under review by the NDFEM Management Board, taking account of the virtual experience of the response and resilience study and in light of the evolving Covid-19 situation.

*Question No. 420 answered with Question No. 379.*

### **Departmental Advertising**

421. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount spent across his Department on advertising in relation to Covid-19 by month and by media outlet (details supplied) from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021. [13562/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department has not incurred any expenditure on advertising in national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio, regional and local radio stations and across social media platforms on COVID-19 awareness raising campaigns.

However, in 2020, my Department spent €192,907 on public information material as part of the Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This expenditure related to the printing and translation, including into braille and sign language, of an information brochure on the Community Call initiative which was delivered to every home; and the design of the COVID-19 Guide for the Bereaved.

### **Diaspora Issues**

422. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on matters raised in correspondence in relation to a building (details supplied) in New York; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12482/21]

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

I am disappointed and concerned about the proposed sale and I have put on the record of the House my opposition to that sale. Through our Consulate in New York, I have urged the Board of the AIHS to reconsider this decision. The building's loss would be keenly felt by the community in New York and beyond.

I welcome the Statement by the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence urging efforts to ensure that the building remains available to the people of New York, the US and Ireland.

There have also been statements by high-profile Irish and Irish-American individuals and institutions in opposition to the sale.

Our Consulate General in New York has been in contact with a range of individuals and organisations in the city about this issue. From these discussions, their assessment is that there is

sufficient support among the community for the Society to remain in its current iconic location and to thrive, subject to the right structures being put in place. The Consulate is also maintaining ongoing contact with the President of the AIHS on the situation.

I welcome the Deputy's question and the correspondence supplied as further evidence of the value and importance the building and the Society play in US-Ireland relations and the desire for the building to remain available to the Irish community of New York and beyond. Keeping the premises on Fifth Avenue available could benefit a huge range of Irish organisations, including Higher Education Institutions and their alumni in the US.

The matter of naming the building or other such changes would, of course, be a matter for decision by the Board of the Society at the right time.

We remain ready to engage in finding a constructive solution that meets the needs of the community and other stakeholders.

### **Foreign Conflicts**

423. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views that the international community must provide humanitarian assistance and support a peaceful and lasting resolution to the conflict in Syria; if Ireland in the role of co-penholder on the Syrian humanitarian file within in the UN Security Council can help to achieve these objectives; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12523/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The conflict in Syria continues to generate significant humanitarian needs and to have profound repercussions for the overall stability of the entire region. More than 13 million people are in need inside the country and more than 5.6 million refugees in neighbouring countries. The onset of winter and the threat Covid sees many millions of people in an enormously vulnerable position

Protecting those in need is our primary focus and obligation. Ireland has contributed almost €170 million in humanitarian assistance to the Syria crisis to date, our largest response to a single crisis. I continue to call on the international community to do all that it can to ensure that extensive needs of the Syrian people can continue to be met.

In order to bring this humanitarian crisis to an end, we need a sustainable end to the conflict in Syria. I strongly support all efforts to bring resolve the conflict, led by UN Special Envoy Pederson under the framework of Security Council 2254. As we approach a decade of conflict, I call on all parties to the conflict to redouble their efforts towards the political solution that the people of Syria so badly deserve.

As noted, Ireland is co-penholder on the Syrian humanitarian file on the Security Council with Norway. In this role we will continue to strongly advocate on the Council that humanitarian assistance must reach all people in need in Syria.

### **Human Rights**

424. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if Ireland is supportive of the promotion of democracy and basic human rights in Bahrain; if Ireland can advance these objectives through the membership of the EU and the UN Security Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12526/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Respect for human rights is an integral part of Ireland's foreign policy and we consistently seek to raise our concerns on human rights issues through the most appropriate and effective channels. The human rights situation in Bahrain remains a matter of serious concern.

Although Bahrain has repeatedly stated its commitment to improving its human rights record and safeguarding human rights as enshrined in the Bahraini Constitution, we are concerned by ongoing instances of violations of fundamental freedoms, including violations of freedom of opinion and expression, as well as the targeting of human rights defenders.

Ireland also engages on the issue of human rights in Bahrain through the European Union, including through the EU Delegation in Riyadh which is accredited to Bahrain. The most recent EU-Bahrain Human Rights Dialogue took place on 22 February and was chaired by the EU Special Representative for Human Rights Eamon Gilmore. A number of issues of concern were raised with Bahrain at the forum, including rule of law, prison conditions, right to a fair trial, freedom of expression, freedom of association, death penalty, torture, and the impact of Covid-19 on the human rights situation.

Ireland has also raised concerns on human rights in Bahrain in relevant international fora, notably the UN Human Rights Council.

Ireland will continue to monitor developments in Bahrain, and to call on the Bahraini Government to deliver on its stated commitment to make progress in relation to human rights.

## Human Rights

425. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if Ireland is supportive of the introduction of fundamental rights and liberties particularly for women in Saudi Arabia; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12529/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Protecting and promoting human rights is a cornerstone of Ireland's foreign policy. Ireland has consistently supported women human rights defenders and continually advocates for the freedom of all civil society actors to operate in a safe and enabling environment.

We acknowledge the progress that Saudi Arabia has made in recent years on human rights in a number of areas, particularly gender equality, penal reform and a decrease in the use of the death penalty. However we remain concerned regarding civil liberties and in particular the ongoing detention of a number of women's rights defenders. Ireland has raised our concerns on these issues bilaterally with the Saudi authorities.

Ireland also raises these issues in international fora. At the most recent Human Rights Council in February, Ireland co-signed a Joint Statement which expressed concern at the continued restrictions on political and civil rights in Saudi Arabia.

We welcome that plans are advancing to establish an EU-Saudi Arabia Human Rights Dialogue. This will provide a valuable additional forum to discuss human rights issues.

## International Sanctions

426. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if Ireland will support the imposition of sanctions on Belarus through membership of the EU; and if he will make a

statement on the matter. [12530/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I am deeply concerned by the ongoing human rights situation in Belarus. We continue to see the daily harassment and intimidation of civil society, journalists and independent media, unjust detentions and apparent attempts to criminalise human rights work. The repression of the Belarusian people, who are peacefully and courageously defending their democratic and human rights, is totally unacceptable.

As is well known, a concern for human rights is at the core of Ireland's international engagement. We have been very clear that the violations of human rights in Belarus must end immediately. Allegations of such violations need to be independently, transparently and credibly investigated and all those unjustly detained, including political prisoners, must be released. These are fundamental principles for us and this is what we and the EU have communicated during the latest session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

We continue to support civil society in Belarus along with our EU partners, while pressing the Belarusian authorities to adhere to their international obligations and commitments. One such measure is through the imposition of targeted sanctions. There have now been three tranches of EU sanctions imposed against individuals responsible for the ongoing repression of the Belarusian people and businesses which benefit from or support the regime. Ireland is open to further restrictive measures and we have communicated this to our EU colleagues.

I can assure you that Ireland will keep the situation high on the international agenda and do what we can to bring about a peaceful, inclusive and democratic resolution to the current crisis.

### **Human Rights Cases**

427. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if Ireland has raised concerns regarding the welfare of a person (details supplied) living in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12531/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I am aware of the case to which the Deputy refers, and the reports are a cause for serious concern.

We note that the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has raised the case with the UAE authorities and has requested more information and clarification on the current situation. We fully support the High Commissioner's intervention and look forward to a full and early response from the UAE to the request.

### **International Sanctions**

428. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the reason Ireland is supportive of the imposition of sanctions on Venezuela through membership of the EU; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12532/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** There is a commitment in the Programme for Government to support international efforts to achieve a democratic solution to the Venezuelan crisis.

Ireland works closely with our EU and international partners to seek to ensure a coordinated approach to the political, economic, social and humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, based on shared democratic, rule of law and human rights values. The EU introduced restrictive mea-

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asures on Venezuela in November 2017, and in November 2020, and the measures were further extended until 14 November 2021.

On 22 February 2021, 19 additional individuals were added to the EU restrictive measures list, bringing the total number of listings to 55. The individuals were listed due to their role in acts and decisions undermining democracy and the rule of law in Venezuela, or because of serious human rights violations. The measures are targeted and designed not to have adverse humanitarian effects or otherwise unintended consequences for the people of Venezuela. Ireland supports the imposition of these targeted measures in light of the worsening crisis in Venezuela.

Ireland also supports the EU Council Conclusions of 25 January 2021 which stated that the legislative elections held in Venezuela on 6 December 2020 could not be considered credible, inclusive or transparent, and reaffirmed the EU's commitment to supporting a peaceful, negotiated and democratic solution to the crisis.

I remain deeply concerned by the serious and deteriorating situation in Venezuela. The different elements of this crisis are inextricably linked and continue to have a grave impact on the people of Venezuela. I was troubled by the September 2020 report of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission to the UN Human Rights Council on the human rights situation in Venezuela. The 46th Session of the Human Rights Council will today, 10 March, hear an oral update on the Fact-Finding Mission.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated the situation in the country. The mass migration that has occurred as a result of the crisis is also severely impacting on neighbouring countries. In 2021, it is estimated that the total number of people to leave Venezuela since the beginning of the crisis could rise to 7 million.

In October, the EU expanded its Guidance Note on how COVID-19-related humanitarian aid could be provided to countries that are subject to EU restrictive measures to include a chapter on Venezuela. The Note gives practical guidance on how to comply with EU sanctions when providing humanitarian aid, in particular medical assistance to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. This ensures that humanitarian operators have the reassurance they need to deliver assistance to Venezuela during this unprecedented time.

Ireland has been active in responding to the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela. Since 2019, we have provided almost €2.5 million in funding to the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), as well as to NGOs responding to the needs of migrants and refugees from Venezuela.

I will continue to support efforts to overcome the crisis which can only be resolved through a negotiated and peaceful process that fully involves and is owned by the people of Venezuela.

## **Human Rights**

429. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has raised concerns with his Polish counterpart regarding the recent rolling back of sexual and reproductive rights for women and girls in Poland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12552/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The recent changes to laws concerning abortion in Poland are of great concern to many people in Poland and the EU more generally. We hope that the Polish authorities will pursue a compassionate and fair approach to this issue, taking into account the important issues that have been raised in response to the recent developments.

Ireland has its own recent experience of these issues and we have seen major changes in recent years. Our experience in Ireland in achieving broad consensus in this area is something we are proud of and always willing to engage on with others.

The Government engages regularly with our Polish counterparts, at Ministerial and official level. We will continue this engagement across this and a broad range of issues, including where it pertains to the protection of women's sexual and reproductive health and issues of gender equality.

### **Passport Services**

430. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the rationale behind the closure of the Passport Office; if the staff have been redeployed elsewhere; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12678/21]

431. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the reason for the level 5 pause in respect of the issuing of passports by the Passport Office; his plans to deal with the impending delays for passport issuing given that persons need their passports on a daily basis for identification purposes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12685/21]

434. **Deputy John Paul Phelan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when he expects the online passport application and renewal process to be back up and running (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12808/21]

435. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when the passport renewal services will resume; if plans are in place to deal with the backlog of applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12824/21]

440. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the procedure in place for persons who require a new passport that is not a renewal to receive same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13060/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 430, 431, 434, 435 and 440 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 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 assists 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. Where it is a first time application, the application will be assessed where the applicant has no other citizenship. Adult first time applications require a very high level of verification to protect the integrity of the Irish passport.

Applicants who require a passport for emergency purposes, or to travel for urgent reasons, should contact the Passport Service via our Customer Service Hub Webchat function on our website.

Irish citizens who are resident overseas should make contact through the local Irish Embassy or Consulate General, or WebChat.

The Passport Service has a comprehensive plan in place to resume all services, in line with the National Framework for Living with COVID-19. When operations resume at Level 4, all applications received via Passport Online will be processed. The Passport Service 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, Northern Ireland Passport Express and applications for Foreign Birth Registrations at Level 3 of the framework.

### **Passport Services**

432. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if there are full-time documentary fraud experts working in the Passport Office. [12696/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Passport Service takes its responsibility to protect the integrity of the Irish passport very seriously.

The Irish passport has a strong international reputation due to the strength of security features within the book and the robust processes involved in its issuance.

The Integrity Section of the Passport Service was established in 2015 to improve all aspects of fraud detection and prevention in order to protect the integrity of the passport. Staff numbers in the Integrity Section have increased in recent years and new and improved systems have been put in place. This large investment in technology and structures has helped to improve our recording and detecting of fraud.

The Passport Service has Document Validation Officers who have received training in Document Fraud awareness. The Passport Service has access to Document Experts at Forensic Science Ireland and avail of their expertise.

### **Consular Services**

433. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of times he has spoken formally with the Irish Consulate General in Sydney since 1 March 2020. [12719/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Although I have not had occasion to speak formally to the Consulate General during the past year, I am kept fully informed of the Consulate General's activities by officials in the Department of Foreign Affairs who are in almost daily communication with the Consulate General's Office.

I wish to pay tribute to the staff of the Consulate General for their exceptional efforts during the early stages of the pandemic when they provided extraordinary assistance to the Irish community in New South Wales. Despite pandemic restrictions, the Consulate General has continued without interruption to provide consular services to the large Irish and Irish-Australian community in that region. In addition to providing consular services, the Consulate General has continued its broad range of activities promoting Ireland's interests, especially in promoting our economic links with New South Wales.

### **Departmental Internships**

436. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under his aegis in 2019; the cost in terms of wages and allowances; and the estimated numerical capacity of State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis. [12955/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** There were no State or semi-State agencies under the aegis of my Department in 2019.

### **Northern Ireland**

437. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will raise the case of a person (details supplied) to ensure the case is adequately investigated by authorities in Northern Ireland; the steps he will take to ensure the family is supported by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12966/21]

**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.

### **Foreign Birth Registration**

438. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has considered altering the requirement for a person to register on the foreign births register before the next generation's birth in order to avail of Irish citizenship (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13030/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Entitlement to Irish citizenship is determined by the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956 ("the 1956 Act"), as amended, under which Irish citizenship may be obtained by birth, by descent, or by naturalisation.

The 1956 Act provides that great-grandchildren of Irish-born persons are not eligible for entry into the Foreign Births Register (FBR) unless their parents were entered onto the Register at the time of their birth. To change this, an amendment of the 1956 Act would be required.

The Department of Justice is responsible for citizenship matters. Any amendment to the 1956 Act is a matter for the Minister for Justice.

The Department of Foreign Affairs administers the FBR process and operates a clear and transparent general policy for processing FBR applications. In situations where the completion of registrations potentially impact on the rights of a person, it will consider urgent requests to expedite registered applications on a case by case basis. During Level 5 restrictions, applicants

can make contact with the Passport Service through the WebChat service.

### **Shannon Airport Facilities**

439. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the times that US military aircraft landed at Shannon airport on 11 January 2021 and 23 January 2021; the times that the aircraft departed; the identity of the aircraft, including the registration number; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13058/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** As Minister for Foreign Affairs, I am responsible for diplomatic clearance for overflights and landings by foreign military aircraft, on the basis of applications made by accredited Embassies of the countries concerned. It is not the policy of my Department to disclose the details of requests for diplomatic clearances, as such information is provided by Embassies in the expectation of the maintenance of confidence. The precise arrangements for arrivals and departures of aircraft are a matter for the aviation authorities, in the same way as for civil aircraft. My Department has no role with regard to that aspect.

*Question No. 440 answered with Question No. 430.*

### **Northern Ireland**

441. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the outcome of the most recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and with members of the Northern Ireland Executive on the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13309/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I am in regular contact with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and other political leaders on a range of issues, including in relation to the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland.

On 3 March, I met with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Brandon Lewis, and with Lord Frost, who since 1 March is the Cabinet Minister responsible for EU-UK relations. At this meeting I expressed the Government's grave concern and regret that the UK was planning to move in a unilateral way, rather than working in continued partnership with the EU in accordance with the EU-UK joint statements of 11 and 24 February.

I am well aware of the practical challenges, which some businesses and people in Northern Ireland have faced in relation to certain aspects of the Protocol's implementation. I, and officials in my Department, continue to engage closely with counterparts and other stakeholders in Northern Ireland, including in the business and civil society communities. We are listening carefully to any concerns they have.

In this regard, Ireland has consistently advocated a pragmatic approach to implementation within the existing framework of the Protocol, including joint consideration of modest extensions to grace periods. This is, however, only possible in a spirit of cooperation and partnership and through the agreed mechanisms.

I have consistently said that we want the Protocol to work for Northern Ireland, and for the island as a whole, in as smooth a manner as possible. It is important that Northern Ireland is able to benefit from the considerable positive opportunities created by the Protocol.

The Irish Government's focus remains on ensuring that the Protocol, as an international agreement concluded by the EU and UK, is fully implemented. It is the agreed and only solution to the problems created on the island of Ireland by Brexit.

We will continue to have regular contact with political leaders and engage with other stakeholders, including businesses and civic society in Northern Ireland in relation to the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland.

### **Northern Ireland**

442. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the arrangements for further discussions with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on the full implementation of the New Decade, New Approach policy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13310/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** One of the Government's key tasks is to see the New Decade, New Approach agreement implemented. It was agreed that there would be regular review meetings involving the two Governments at Ministerial level and the parties to monitor progress on implementing the New Decade, New Approach (NDNA) agreement, and the delivery of commitments by each Government.

On Monday 11 January, I participated by videoconference in the first Implementation Review Meeting of the New Decade, New Approach agreement alongside the First Minister, deputy First Minister, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and party leaders in Northern Ireland. During that meeting, we discussed the progress that has been made over the past year on the implementation of our respective commitments, and the shared challenges we face in the context of both the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit. We reaffirmed our collective commitment to the ongoing implementation of the New Decade, New Approach agreement. It is hoped that we can arrange a second implementation review meeting in the period ahead.

I will continue to engage closely with the Secretary of State as we move forward on these and other issues. Regular contacts are also maintained by officials in my Department with the Northern Ireland Office, as we seek to work together on a wide range of areas of cooperation.

### **Departmental Information**

443. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the advice or briefings his Department received from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine ahead of his meeting with the French Minister for European and Foreign Affairs in Paris on 3 December 2020. [13348/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** As part of my work on deepening the extensive and important partnership between Ireland and France, I visited Paris on 3 December for discussions with the French Minister for European and Foreign Affairs, Mr. Jean-Yves Le Drian. I also met with the French Minister of State for European Affairs, Mr. Clément Beaune.

I exchanged views on Brexit and a number of European issues of common interest with Foreign Minister Le Drian and Minister of State Beaune. In addition, during my meeting with Minister Le Drian, I also discussed a number of matters on the UN Security Council agenda, in advance of Ireland taking up its seat at the Security Council in January

As agricultural issues were not on the agenda of any of these meetings, specific briefing was not sought from or given by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine for this visit. However, I have ongoing engagement with the Minister on a wide range of matters including the impact of Brexit on the agri-food and fish sectors.

### **Maritime Jurisdiction**

444. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the progress that has been made in discussions with the UK Government to resolve the conflict over the right of Irish fishing vessels to fish in the waters around Rockall. [13349/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I remain in contact with my colleague, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, on Rockall. We, along with our respective officials, are working through consideration of all options for further engagement on the issues involved.

I have outlined Ireland's position on Rockall in contacts with both the UK and Scottish Governments in the last number of months. In my engagements, I have made clear the Government's position, which is consistent, and remains as has been clearly set out by successive Governments.

I spoke with my Scottish counterpart, Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs, Mike Russell, on 14 January 2021, when this matter was raised. We agreed to keep in contact on the issue. Irish and Scottish officials have been in touch in the period since that call.

This contact and broader efforts will continue in the coming weeks. Irish officials also remain in ongoing contact with the European Commission on all matters relating to the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement, including fisheries.

Through the range of engagements set out, the Government is seeking to address the issues involved, reflecting the longstanding fisheries tradition in the area.

Ireland has never made any claims to Rockall, which is a small uninhabitable granite rock located approximately 160 nautical miles west of the Scottish islands of St. Kilda and some 230 nautical miles to the north-west of Donegal. Nor has Ireland ever recognised British sovereignty claims over Rockall, and accordingly has not recognised a 12 nautical mile territorial sea around it either.

### **Irish Aid**

445. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on the Ireland Fellows Programme for 2021; the way it has been adapted in the wake of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13360/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** Each year the Department of Foreign Affairs' Ireland Fellows Programme offers promising individuals from ODA-eligible partner countries opportunities to study for a master's qualification at an Irish University or Institute of Technology. The programme is intended to nurture future leaders; to develop in-country capacity to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals; and to build positive relationships with Ireland. The award covers course fees, accommodation, living costs, and flights.

The Ireland Fellows Programme has operated since 1974, bringing students from African partner countries and, since 2009, from Vietnam. Following a decision to expand the programme in 2019-20 it was enlarged to include students from the occupied Palestinian Territories, and in 2020-2021, from Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

There are presently 120 Fellows in Ireland, studying at 15 Higher Education Institutions. As is the case with all other students in Ireland, their higher education experience has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with classes, seminars and other group activities having moved on line. The Ireland Fellows Programme is managed on a day-to-day basis by the Irish Council for International Students (ICOS). Officials from this Department are working closely with ICOS and the HEIs to monitor the Fellows' welfare and ensure their Irish experience is as positive as possible.

### **Irish Aid**

446. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on the progress being made on the implantation of Ireland's Better World strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13361/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** A Better World, Ireland's policy for international development was launched in February 2019. It provides the framework for Ireland's development cooperation in the decade ahead and represents a step change in our approach, bringing together our development cooperation and diplomacy for optimum impact. In the two years since the policy was launched, there has been notable progress in delivering and advancing various aspects of A Better World including on strategy development, policy influence, whole of government initiatives, and new programme funding commitments, the latter facilitated by a €30 million increase in the allocation for Official Development Aid for this year. Clear deliverables achieved include the publication of Ireland's first ever Small Island Developing States (SIDS) strategy; the launch of the Third National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security; the creation of an Irish Trust Fund in the Asian Development Bank for support to disaster and climate resilience in member SIDS; and the launch of a Domestic Resource Mobilisation Initiative, in partnership with the Department of Finance and Revenue Commissioners.

A new Climate Unit has been established within the Development Cooperation and Africa Division of my Department - the Division which leads on the Irish Aid programme. This Unit is taking forward the Programme for Government commitment to double the proportion of Official Development Aid which tackles climate change. Last week I launched Ireland's Climate Finance Report for 2019, which set the baseline for that commitment.

While COVID-19 rolls back development gains around the world, the Irish Aid programme has proved its self well positioned to respond. Through country programmes in Africa, Ireland is supporting the strengthening of public health systems, amplified by Irish Aid's investment this year of €50 million in global public health, including COVAX which will see vaccines distributed to 90 lower and middle income countries. Ireland is also a member of the Team Europe response to the pandemic - the EU and its Member States are already supporting the vaccination of 20% of the world's population through COVAX, and this is likely to grow. My Department works closely with the HSE in its work on global health, including in the provision of mental health support to frontline workers in COVID-affected partner countries.

With approximately 35% of Official Development Aid generated by other Departments, co-ordination across Government has been strengthened over the past two years. In addition, the

capacity to manage programmes, particularly in key thematic areas such as climate, food and health, as well as oversight, is being strengthened, building from a strong base as identified by the OECD's review of Irish Aid published last year.

Work is ongoing to increase investment in research, and improve our public engagement. In this regard, I am currently engaged in a public consultation towards a new strategy on development education, for finalisation this summer.

Taken together these steps will ensure that Irish Aid is fit for purpose as we implement A Better World over the next decade.

## Irish Aid

447. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the way the Irish embassy in Ethiopia is delivering the Irish Aid programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13362/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** The Government's policy for international development, 'A Better World', launched in February 2019, commits to scaling Ireland's investment across four policy priorities: gender equality; reducing humanitarian need; climate action and strengthening governance.

This policy was complemented, in November 2019, by the Government's Strategy for Africa to 2025, which builds on Ireland's long history of engagement in the continent and commits to working with African countries in their efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, with a particular focus on reaching those furthest behind first. In May 2020, an OECD review recognised the excellence of Irish Aid, Ireland's international development programme, which helps Ireland play a leading role advocating for poverty reduction, channelling our assistance to where it is needed most.

Ireland has a longstanding partnership with Ethiopia. The Embassy's development programme, which has an annual indicative budget of €32 million, focuses on: regional and national peace and security; democratic governance and accountability; humanitarian response and social protection; health and gender equality; and economic development. Addis Ababa is an important hub for African regional and continental organisations, and Ireland's Embassy there is accredited to the African Union and the regional bloc IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development), through which we engage on regional peace and security issues.

The current Irish Aid programme in Ethiopia has a strong humanitarian focus, and responding to the devastating humanitarian crisis in the Tigray region is a major focus. Social protection is also a core element of the programme, through support to the flagship Productive Safety Net Programme, which provides food and cash transfers to food insecure households and highly vulnerable populations across the country. Ireland's programme also focuses on support for the national health system, including the delivery of maternal health programmes. Given the gendered nature of poverty, the programme strongly prioritises the needs of women and girls.

Ireland's programme in Ethiopia received a very positive assessment from the OECD 2020 DAC peer review, including for its principled political engagement on humanitarian issues, and for its strong advocacy for gender equality. The review also recognised that Ireland plays an important leadership role in terms of donor coordination in Ethiopia. We will continue to keep the development programme under close review, particularly in light of ongoing conflict in Tigray.

## Irish Aid

448. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the way that the Irish embassy in Liberia is delivering the Irish Aid programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13363/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** The Government's policy for international development, 'A Better World', launched in February 2019, commits to scaling Ireland's investment across four policy priorities: gender equality; reducing humanitarian need; climate action and strengthening governance.

This policy was complemented, in November 2019, by the Government's Strategy for Africa to 2025, which builds on Ireland's long history of engagement in the continent and commits to working with African countries in their efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, with a particular focus on reaching those furthest behind first. In May 2020, an OECD review recognised the excellence of Irish Aid, Ireland's international development programme, which helps Ireland play a leading role advocating for poverty reduction, channelling our assistance to where it is needed most.

The Embassy of Ireland in Liberia was established in 2018, building on the foundations set in place by an Irish Aid office which had previously supervised Irish development cooperation in the country and, before that, the contribution of Irish peacekeepers in the UNMIL mission from 2003-2007.

The Irish Aid engagement in Liberia is deepening following the establishment of the Embassy, whose approach is strongly aligned to *A Better World*, in particular the commitment to reaching the furthest behind first.

The Embassy is working to strengthen institutions and enable active participation by Liberians in decision-making processes. Particular focus is given to increasing women's participation in local peacebuilding structures, the promotion of peaceful elections, and support to protecting Human Rights Defenders.

Ireland has long been active in the health sector in Liberia and played a coordination role during the Ebola outbreak in 2014-16. The Embassy continues to work to improve health and nutrition services, and to prevent and respond to sexual and gender based violence (SGBV). In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Embassy supports the Liberian Ministry of Health's primary health response, including case investigation and management, isolation and contact tracing.

Nutrition is a strong component of the Irish Aid work in Liberia, with the Embassy working in an innovative partnership with NGOs, government, local civil society and communities to improve nutritional status of under-fives in two counties where chronic malnutrition indices are highest.

## Irish Aid

449. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the way that the Irish embassy in Kenya is delivering the Irish Aid programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13364/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** The Government's policy for international development, 'A Better World', launched in

February 2019, commits to scaling Ireland's investment across four policy priorities: gender equality; reducing humanitarian need; climate action and strengthening governance.

This policy was complemented, in November 2019, by the Government's Strategy for Africa to 2025, which builds on Ireland's long history of engagement in the continent and commits to working with African countries in their efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, with a particular focus on reaching those furthest behind first. In May 2020, an OECD review recognised the excellence of Irish Aid, Ireland's international development programme, which helps Ireland play a leading role advocating for poverty reduction, channelling our assistance to where it is needed most.

The Embassy of Ireland in Kenya has three pillars of development focus: 1) trade promotion and private sector engagement with a focus on women's economic empowerment; 2) implementation of the Ireland Kenya Agri-Food Strategy; and 3) promotion of opportunities for youth and women through the Young Scientists Kenya (YSK) Initiative, and gender/gender based violence interventions. In 2021, the Embassy will also focus on strengthening governance in response to the evolving elections landscape in Kenya.

A highlight of Kenya's development cooperation programme has been the flagship Young Scientists Kenya initiative, of which President Kenyatta is patron. In 2021, the Embassy will continue to support YSK's efforts to reach youth in all 47 counties, and in particular the most disadvantaged. In 2020, YSK, with the Embassy's support, was able to pivot online following the COVID-19 outbreak and continue its activities virtually, reaching 13,000 students directly before the outbreak COVID-19, and subsequently more than 10,000 through online outreach.

To implement the Ireland Kenya Agri-Food Strategy, the Embassy will work in partnership with Irish and Kenyan institutions focused on dairy, fisheries and potato initiatives which benefit smallholder farmers, in particular female farmers, as well as supporting climate change adaptation. In 2020, 3,827 smallholder farmers were trained on good agricultural practices and 197 'farmer field business schools' were established which have improved farmer income and enhanced awareness on finance and credit.

In 2020, Irish Aid funding was also allocated to urgent humanitarian needs arising from COVID-19. This included supporting a social safety nets project providing cash transfers to vulnerable households in urban settlements implemented by an NGO consortium that included Concern. Additionally, the Embassy provided small grants to organisations addressing the impacts of COVID-19 on gender based violence and supporting female traders to protect their small businesses.

## **Irish Aid**

450. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the way that the Irish embassy in Malawi is delivering the Irish Aid programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13365/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** The Government's policy for international development, '*A Better World*', launched in February 2019, commits to scaling Ireland's investment across four policy priorities: gender equality; reducing humanitarian need; climate action and strengthening governance.

This policy was complemented, in November 2019, by the Government's Strategy for Africa to 2025, which builds on Ireland's long history of engagement in the continent and commits to working with African countries in their efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development

Goals, with a particular focus on reaching those furthest behind first. In May 2020, an OECD review recognised the excellence of Irish Aid, Ireland's international development programme, which helps Ireland play a leading role advocating for poverty reduction, channelling our assistance to where it is needed most.

Malawi is one of the world's poorest countries, ranked 174 out of 189 countries in the 2020 UN Human Development Index. In recent years, Malawi has been particularly affected by annual food insecurity, which affects large cohorts of the population for several months of the year.

Since the opening of the Embassy of Ireland in Lilongwe in 2007, and the setting up of the Irish Aid programme, Ireland has worked with a variety of partners including government, United Nations, international and local NGOs, and research institutions.

A highlight of the Embassy's programme in recent years has been Ireland's work on developing the social protection system in Malawi, which contributes to the reducing humanitarian need policy priority. Ireland has made a marked contribution to the development and piloting of flexible, shock responsive, electronic cash transfers. This investment has informed national policy and the manner in which the Government of Malawi and other donors now approach humanitarian crises, including the annual lean season. These flexible cash transfers reduce the impact of crises such as COVID-19, while contributing to sustained improvements in the nutritional status of household members and improving school attendance.

With other development partners, Ireland has provided support to the agricultural sector and for agricultural research in Malawi. This has contributed to diversification of crop production, resulting in, inter alia, improved dietary diversity and improved nutrition.

Ireland has also become a recognised champion of innovative, climate-smart and affordable energy solutions and was a key supporter of the Government of Malawi's ambitious National Cookstove Initiative, which successfully saw two million households switch from open fires to energy saving stoves by the end of 2020. The success of this initiative has led to a reduction in the rate of deforestation, and a reduction in the incidence of respiratory tract infections associated with cooking over open fires.

### **Irish Aid**

451. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the way that the Irish embassy in Mozambique is delivering the Irish Aid programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13366/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** The Government's policy for international development, '*A Better World*', launched in February 2019, commits to scaling Ireland's investment across four policy priorities: gender equality; reducing humanitarian need; climate action and strengthening governance.

This policy was complemented, in November 2019, by the Government's Strategy for Africa to 2025, which builds on Ireland's long history of engagement in the continent and commits to working with African countries in their efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, with a particular focus on reaching those furthest behind first. In May of 2020, an OECD review recognised the excellence of Irish Aid, Ireland's international development programme, which helps Ireland play a leading role advocating for poverty reduction, channelling our assistance to where it is needed most.

Ireland has been delivering development and humanitarian assistance in Mozambique since 1996, after the country emerged from almost thirty years of civil war. Investments in development began from a very low base and today Mozambique remains one of the world's poorest countries, with access to basic services such as water, healthcare and education still challenging.

The Embassy of Ireland in Mozambique aims to make a distinctive and principled foreign policy contribution that includes managing the delivery of the Irish Aid programme. A key objective of the programme is to improve access to quality health and education services – both critical tasks as Mozambique faces the continuing spread of COVID-19.

Ireland's Embassy is working at both political and technical levels in support of the Government of Mozambique's COVID-19 response. In 2020, Ireland made an advance disbursement of funding for Mozambique's health sector pooled fund, amounting to €8 million, and worked with the Ministry of Health to reprioritise donor expenditure in order to procure PPE and to support the recruitment of auxiliary health workers to provide surge capacity in the health system. Ireland's support was critical in ensuring that front line staff were in place to manage the impacts of COVID-19 and that essential health services to the poor, particularly to women, children and vulnerable groups could continue.

Ireland's support to the education sector in Mozambique was also adapted in 2020 in light of COVID-19. As all schools were closed in March, Ireland worked with the Ministry of Education to reprioritise expenditure to support an adapted learning environment, including the provision of virtual classes via television and radio platforms, while also supporting teacher training and preparations for the resumption of primary and secondary education.

Reducing humanitarian need is another key element of Ireland's work. In March and April 2019, Cyclones Idai and Kenneth caused widespread devastation to infrastructure and crops, displaced 400,000 people from their homes, and left more than 2 million people in urgent humanitarian need. In response, Ireland provided just over €4 million to UN and NGO partners. These funds enabled the delivery of lifesaving food assistance, health care, and access to water, sanitation and hygiene to impacted families, and later, provided those displaced with supports to return to their homes. The Embassy's partnerships with Government health, education, and disaster management agencies also contributed to an effective response to the outbreak of cholera following the cyclones, the rehabilitation of schools and hospitals using climate-resilient construction techniques, and to overall coordination of emergency response efforts.

In northern Mozambique, where a violent insurgency has been underway since 2017, Ireland is at the forefront of humanitarian response efforts to meet the needs of more than 660,000 people displaced from their homes by violence, and more than 950,000 facing emergency levels of food insecurity. In 2020, Ireland provided €4.8 million euro to UN, NGO and Red Cross partners working to meet humanitarian needs. This included €2.2 million to the World Food Programme in support of its efforts to provide emergency food assistance to those displaced, and €700,000 to the International Committee of the Red Cross for work to uphold humanitarian law in conflict-affected areas, to support victims of violence, and to provide those displaced with access to health services, water and sanitation.

### **Irish Aid**

452. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the way that the Irish embassy in Sierra Leone is delivering the Irish Aid programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13367/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** The Government's policy for international development, 'A Better World', launched in February 2019, commits to scaling Ireland's investment across four policy priorities: gender equality; reducing humanitarian need; climate action and strengthening governance.

This policy was complemented, in November 2019, by the Government's Strategy for Africa to 2025, which builds on Ireland's long history of engagement in the continent and commits to working with African countries in their efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, with a particular focus on reaching those furthest behind first. In May 2020, an OECD review recognised the excellence of Irish Aid, Ireland's international development programme, which helps Ireland play a leading role advocating for poverty reduction, channelling our assistance to where it is needed most.

Ireland's approach to engagement with Sierra Leone is informed by 'A Better World', with an overarching goal being that women and girls, living in poverty, contribute to and benefit from a more inclusive, resilient and equitable Sierra Leone.

The Embassy of Ireland in Freetown has adopted a number of different, but complementary, approaches to delivering the Irish Aid programme in Sierra Leone, including working with government, other Development Partners and engagement with Civil Society Organisations.

The Embassy of Ireland has a particular focus on improving outcomes for child health through its nutrition programming across a range of partnerships, which address child malnutrition. The Embassy has also partnered with organisations that have developed integrated nutrition sensitive agri-food programmes to respond to the changing global climatic conditions at community level.

Fundamental to the Embassy's work is the empowerment of women and girls to uphold their rights. Through work with its Irish Aid partnerships, it provides healthcare and supports for survivors of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), while also supporting the government of Sierra Leone to realise its commitment to provide free, quality education for all children at primary and second level.

The Embassy also works with a variety of partners to support democracy, accountability and women's political participation in Sierra Leone, aligning closely with two of Ireland's key policy priorities of gender equality and strengthened governance. It has helped build the capacity of a coalition of women leaders to help diffuse political tensions around elections and by-elections.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Embassy collaborated with the EU and three Irish NGOs on a €1.2 million 'Team Europe' COVID-19 response programme. An adaptive programming approach allowed an agile response which promptly met the needs of vulnerable communities in Sierra Leone as a result of the pandemic.

### **Irish Aid**

453. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the way that the Irish embassy in South Africa is delivering the Irish Aid programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13368/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** The Government's policy for international development, 'A Better World', launched in February 2019, commits to scaling Ireland's investment across four policy priorities: gender

equality; reducing humanitarian need; climate action and strengthening governance.

This policy was complemented, in November 2019, by the Government's Strategy for Africa to 2025, which builds on Ireland's long history of engagement in the continent and commits to working with African countries in their efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, with a particular focus on reaching those furthest behind first. In May 2020, an OECD review recognised the excellence of Irish Aid, Ireland's international development programme, which helps Ireland play a leading role advocating for poverty reduction, channelling our assistance to where it is needed most.

Ireland's Embassy in South Africa manages the delivery of Irish Aid programmes in South Africa, Zimbabwe, and the southern Africa sub-region. Ireland has been engaged in development cooperation with South Africa since the country's transition to democracy in 1994, and with Zimbabwe since independence in 1980. Irish Aid programmes focus on education, maternal and child health, human rights and accountability, and tackling Gender-Based Violence (GBV). Since 2020, the Embassy and its partners have also been working to address the impacts of Covid-19.

Gender equality is at the centre of the full range of the Embassy's work. Addressing harmful gender norms, violence, and promoting women's participation in society are core elements of Irish Aid's work, which comprises two streams: at national level, supports to UN and civil society partners aim to influence policy and national processes which address gender equality. At community level, direct interventions support women and children affected by violence and work with men and boys to reduce the incidence of violence.

In South Africa, where GBV is endemic, Ireland has supported the development and roll-out of a National Strategic Plan on Gender-Based Violence and Femicide. The Embassy's work also supports research and community-level engagement with men and boys to encourage behaviour change. In Zimbabwe, the Embassy has worked with UNFPA to lobby for the review of laws and policies to prevent child marriage, and to hold perpetrators of intimate partner violence to account, while civil society organisations supported by the Embassy run shelters and provide access to essential services for survivors of GBV. At regional level, the Embassy supports UN Women's multi-country office for South Africa, Lesotho, Eswatini, Botswana, and Namibia, to implement the Southern African Development Community's (SADC) Framework for Action on GBV.

In South Africa, the Embassy's flagship education programme is the Kader Asmal Fellowship Programme, named in honour of the late Professor Kader Asmal who taught at Trinity College Dublin, co-founded the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement, and was part of the team that negotiated South Africa's transition to democracy. Through this programme, Ireland supports students from South Africa, Zimbabwe and Lesotho to study at Master's degree level in Ireland in strategically important disciplines. 81 Fellowships have been awarded since the programme commenced in 2013, and 14 South Africans were offered fellowships for the 2020/21 academic year.

### **Irish Aid**

454. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the way that the Irish embassy in Tanzania is delivering the Irish Aid programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13369/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Bro-**

**phy):** The Government's policy for international development, 'A Better World', launched in February 2019, commits to scaling Ireland's investment across four policy priorities: gender equality; reducing humanitarian need; climate action and strengthening governance.

This policy was complemented, in November 2019, by the Government's Strategy for Africa to 2025, which builds on Ireland's long history of engagement in the continent and commits to working with African countries in their efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, with a particular focus on reaching those furthest behind first. In May 2020, an OECD review recognised the excellence of Irish Aid, Ireland's international development programme, which helps Ireland play a leading role advocating for poverty reduction, channelling our assistance to where it is needed most.

Ireland has been providing development assistance to Tanzania since 1975. Over that time, Ireland has worked with a wide variety of partner organisations including government institutions, UN agencies, international research institutions, civil society organisations and other donor agencies to deliver on the overall goal of inclusive growth and reduced poverty and vulnerability in Tanzania.

In line with 'A Better World', gender equality, strengthened governance, and climate change adaptation are the priority areas for Ireland's current programme in Tanzania, as well as continued efforts to reduce humanitarian need through support for refugee response efforts.

Ireland works in Tanzania to address gender equality through partnerships that improve healthcare for women and children. These efforts are complemented by support for primary and community based health care services, including reducing malnutrition and stunting, in isolated and under-served rural communities and especially among pregnant women and young children. This programme provides targeted support to those most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, Irish Aid supports technical skills training for adolescents and support to farmers, including and especially women farmers, to produce climate adapted food crops. In seeking to reach the furthest behind first, Ireland plays an important role in supporting and strengthening social protection systems in Tanzania.

To reduce humanitarian need and support the refugee response in Tanzania, Ireland has provided much-needed support to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This has helped in the voluntary repatriation of refugees, the provision of basic healthcare services at refugee camps, and assisted in the response to COVID-19 amongst refugee populations.

Improving governance and supporting effective institutions is another major focus of Ireland's programme in Tanzania. In this respect, the Embassy works with UN partners to strengthen access to justice, in conjunction with the Commission for Human Rights and Good Governance.

### **Irish Aid**

455. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the way that the Irish embassy in Uganda is delivering the Irish Aid programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13370/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** The Government's policy for international development, 'A Better World', launched in February 2019, commits to scaling Ireland's investment across four policy priorities: gender equality; reducing humanitarian need; climate action and strengthening governance.

This policy was complemented, in November 2019, by the Government's Strategy for Africa to 2025, which builds on Ireland's long history of engagement in the continent and commits to working with African countries in their efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, with a particular focus on reaching those furthest behind first. In May 2020, an OECD review recognised the excellence of Irish Aid, Ireland's international development programme, which helps Ireland play a leading role advocating for poverty reduction, channelling our assistance to where it is needed most.

The Embassy of Ireland in Uganda opened in 1994, with the establishment of the Irish Aid programme in the country. Guided by the priorities of 'A Better World', Ireland's focus on the most vulnerable sections of society has been consistent, including through the longstanding prioritisation of the poorest and most marginalised region of Uganda, Karamoja. Ireland's engagement is recognised for its strong focus on girls' education, HIV prevention, and support of social welfare grants for senior citizens. This focus remains highly relevant in providing targeted support to those most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Embassy and its partners will continue to address the impacts of COVID-19 through its programming in 2021.

Ireland has played a key role in supporting an expanded social protection programme in Uganda. A critical component of this programme is the provision of social welfare payments to senior citizens. Ireland's support has helped provide cash transfers and reduce vulnerability of elderly people and their families. This has improved the quality of life across many households, through supporting improved diets as well as increased access to basic health care and education for children. It has also provided opportunities for households to engage in small enterprises.

Improving access to education is a key priority of Ireland's investment in Uganda. In Karamoja, where education and literacy indicators are the lowest in the country, Ireland supports primary and post primary education, vocational training and skills development, as well as bursaries for the most vulnerable students. Support for strengthened governance also remains an important area of focus, and Ireland has worked closely with the EU and other EU Member State partners through the flagship Democratic Governance Facility (DGF), which provides coordinated support to over ninety organisations working to promote democratic governance and human rights.

As a result of its progressive open-door refugee policy, Uganda hosts approximately 1.4 million refugees, the largest refugee population in Africa. The needs of this population are greater than ever, with refugee settlements facing increased food insecurity and risk of malnutrition due to financial constraints. The situation has been compounded further by the COVID-19 pandemic and, in response, Ireland has increased our support for cash transfers, food assistance and provision of basic services to refugees.

### **Irish Aid**

456. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the way that the Irish embassy in Vietnam is delivering the Irish Aid programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13371/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** Ireland's longstanding programme of development cooperation in South East Asia is implemented by the Embassy of Ireland in Hanoi in conjunction with a number of partner organisations. The programme operates primarily in Vietnam itself, with a smaller range of activity in Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar.

Consistent with the commitment to the “furthest behind first” in Ireland’s Policy for International Development, A Better World, the largest component of the Irish Aid programme in Vietnam focuses on poverty reduction for ethnic minorities, aimed at some of that country’s poorest and most marginalised communities. The populations and geographical areas targeted by the Ethnic Minorities Programme include more than half of those living in poverty in Vietnam. Irish Aid supports the Vietnamese Government in implementing the programme in five provinces, with a focus on small-scale infrastructure (local roads, schools, clinics, etc.). Ireland’s Embassy in Hanoi also coordinates an Ethnic Minority Working Group which helps to shape policy and ensure that the social and economic development of ethnic minority communities remains a priority on the Government’s agenda.

Another important element of Irish activity is the Vietnam-Ireland Exchange Programme (IDEAS), which brings together Irish and Vietnamese experts to build technical, governance and policy development capacity in institutions responsible for economic decision-making in Vietnam. IDEAS also brings promising individuals to Ireland to undertake Master’s-level study through the Ireland Fellows programme run by the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Ireland’s also supports civil society in Vietnam, focusing on the themes of disability, poverty reduction, gender empowerment, capacity development and participatory local governance. Ireland provides funding to national and international civil society partners to strengthen their capacity in research, network building and the creation of coalitions for advocacy and potential social change. This support to civil society aims to influence policy response and service delivery in favour of groups that are marginalised on the basis of gender, migrant status, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity or disability. Ireland also funds youth development projects supporting young, creative and enthusiastic people to grow their ideas and turn them into organised actions. The Embassy has made distinctive choices of partners based on shared values and a commitment to sustainable development, gender equality, human rights and good governance.

Ireland’s Regional Programme operates across Myanmar, Cambodia and Lao PDR and addresses issues of humanitarian need, vulnerability and fragility. The support addresses hunger and under-nutrition; promotes livelihood support for very vulnerable groups; facilitates humanitarian de-mining to reduce loss of life and injury and enable post conflict reconstruction; and provides humanitarian assistance for immediate needs in Myanmar.

During the course of 2020, the programme put in place additional supports to lessen the impact of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable in the region as well as to respond to the impact of devastating floods on hundreds of thousands of people in the last quarter of the year.

## Irish Aid

457. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the way that the Irish Embassy in Zambia is delivering the Irish Aid programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13372/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** The Government’s policy for international development, ‘*A Better World*’, launched in February 2019, commits to scaling Ireland’s investment across four policy priorities: gender equality; reducing humanitarian need; climate action and strengthening governance.

This policy was complemented, in November 2019, by the Government’s Strategy for Africa to 2025, which builds on Ireland’s long history of engagement in the continent and commits to working with African countries in their efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development

Goals, with a particular focus on reaching those furthest behind first. In May 2020, an OECD review recognised the excellence of Irish Aid, Ireland’s international development programme, which helps Ireland play a leading role advocating for poverty reduction, channelling our assistance to where it is needed most.

In 2020, Ireland celebrated 40 years of its diplomatic presence in Zambia. While Zambia is classed as a lower middle-income country, much of the population lives in poverty and the country has one of the highest levels of inequality globally. Poverty is significantly worse in rural areas, and for the elderly, women and children. The Embassy of Ireland in Lusaka implements the Irish Aid programme in Zambia with an emphasis on reducing poverty and inequality.

In line with priorities on climate action and gender equality, a highlight of the programme in Zambia in recent years has been Ireland’s work on nutrition. Through a range of partners, the Embassy has worked to promote the availability and consumption of nutritious food products in rural and urban areas. For example, the Embassy has partnered with an organisation which has led to strengthening of agricultural supply chains of nutritious products by stimulating agricultural market development and investments in smallholder farmers, especially among women farmers.

The Embassy has adapted its programming in recent years to take account of the increasing humanitarian needs in Zambia resulting from climate and other shocks. In 2019, the Embassy partnered with an international NGO to support an emergency school feeding programme in response to a food security crisis in which up to 2.3 million Zambians required urgent support. In 2020 the Embassy partnered with UNICEF to implement an emergency cash transfer programme for 130,000 vulnerable urban households affected by COVID-19. This programme enabled these households to buy nutritious foods and other basic essentials.

## Gender Equality

458. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps that his Department is taking with respect to promoting International Women’s Day; the steps he is taking to promote gender equality in the developing world; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13464/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Achieving gender equality is at the core of Ireland’s foreign and development policies. Our approach is informed by our own national journey and the political and social transformation that continues to take place in Ireland.

The Department of Foreign Affairs actively promotes gender equality in relevant multilateral fora, including through our current membership of the UN Security Council, as well as through debates, resolutions, and statements elsewhere at the UN, such as the Commission on the Status of Women and the Human Rights Council. Likewise, our bilateral missions engage with host Governments and civil society to host numerous events, including in recent years the promotion of St Brigid’s Day as a celebration of women’s achievements in Ireland and further afield.

This year, on the occasion of International Women’s Day, we are co-hosting a UN Security Council Open Arria-formula meeting on the theme of “Call to lead by example: ensuring the full, equal and meaningful participation of women in UN led Peace Processes”. Internally, the Department is inviting a distinguished panel of women activists to reflect on how lessons from Ireland’s gender equality journey can continue to inform our foreign policy, including in the

light of setbacks to women's equality arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

As regards the developing world specifically, 'A Better World: Ireland's Policy for International Development' establishes gender equality as one of four policy priorities and recognises that gender equality is fundamental for the transformation required to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals.

'A Better World' commits that we will have an overarching focus on women and girls in all our development partnerships and interventions. Ireland is committed to taking a transformative approach to gender equality, recognising that achieving gender equality involves going beyond looking at individual women and girls and requires approaches that seek to address the key structural and institutional barriers to achieving gender equality and ensuring a focus on men, boys and masculinities. 'A Better World' adopts a twin-track approach in committing to integrate gender equality across all our interventions and to increasing allocations to interventions directly dedicated to achieving gender equality. These commitments include increased funding for women's rights organisations; strengthened support for women's political participation; intensifying our work on Women, Peace and Security and on Gender Based Violence; increased engagement on women's economic empowerment; prioritising education for girls in our commitments in education; and deepening and expanding our engagement on sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Ireland is consistently ranked by the OECD Development Assistance Committee as among the OECD member countries with the highest gender equality focus in official development assistance (ODA). In 2019, approximately 76% of Ireland's bilateral allocable ODA contributed to gender equality and women's empowerment.

### **Irish Aid**

459. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of the assistance provided to the central Sahel region of Africa; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13465/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** Sahel countries count among the world's most at risk of crises and disasters. An estimated 23.6 million people across the region are in need of urgent humanitarian aid, the highest number ever recorded, including more than 13 million requiring emergency food assistance.

Ireland is supporting stabilisation efforts on the ground in Mali and the Sahel through our peacekeeping contribution to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), where 14 Defence Forces personnel are deployed, the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM) where 19 Defence Forces personnel are deployed, and our deployment of one Irish civilian expert to the Civilian CSDP Mission EU CAP Sahel Niger.

Ireland also engages on the Central Sahel at EU level, and through dedicated international fora to coordinate international efforts on the Sahel, including the Coalition for the Sahel and as an observer member of the Sahel Alliance, as well as through our seat on the United Nations Security Council.

Between 2014-2020, Ireland provided over €43 million in humanitarian and development assistance to Sahel States. This includes €2.5 million to Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger in 2020. At a Ministerial Roundtable on the Central Sahel in October 2020, I announced that Ireland would provide a further €500,000 for the International Committee of the Red Cross, for its humanitarian programme in the Sahel.

Ireland directs our international development efforts towards reaching the furthest behind first. Our scaled-up humanitarian assistance and political engagement is an expression of solidarity by the people of Ireland with the people of the Central Sahel.

### Foreign Policy

460. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on his plans to deepen Ireland's engagement with francophone nations in Africa; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13466/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** In line with commitments made in the Global Ireland: Ireland's Strategy for Africa to 2025, Ireland is committed to strengthening political dialogue, development cooperation, and trade and investment relationships with the African continent. That Strategy signals the Sahel and francophone West Africa for intensified engagement.

Notwithstanding the challenges posed by COVID-19, that intensification of engagement has begun.

As part of our deepened engagement with francophone Africa, in 2019 Ireland joined the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) as an observer member, and appointed an additional diplomatic officer to Embassy Paris to support enhanced political engagement with francophone African states. In 2020, Ireland formally became a member of the African Development Bank, headquartered in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire.

A Special Envoy has been appointed for francophone Africa and the Sahel for the duration of our Security Council membership, who engages with a wide range of actors and represents Ireland at key engagements, as well as in the EU network of Special Envoys for the Sahel.

Ireland has participated in the recently established Coalition for the Sahel, including at Ministerial level, while also joining, as an observer, the Sahel Alliance, an international donor coordination platform for development and humanitarian assistance efforts in the region.

This engagement builds upon Ireland's longstanding contribution to peace and security efforts in the region, including the presence of Defence Forces personnel in the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), the UN Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), the EU Training Mission in Mali (EUTM Mali), as well as a civilian expert to EUCAP Sahel Niger.

As members of the United Nations Security Council, Ireland works closely with francophone African States, particularly with Niger as co-penholders on the file of the UN Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) and as co-chairs of the Informal Expert Group on Climate and Security at the UN Security Council.

Between 2014-2020, Ireland, through the Irish Aid programme, provided over €43 million in humanitarian and development assistance to francophone States in the Sahel. Ireland has also provided over €23 million since 2017 in support of the international response to the humanitarian crisis in the Central African Republic.

Ireland's existing engagement and capacities to date provide a strong base from which to deepen our diplomatic and other relations with the countries of West Africa, including opening two Embassies in the region by 2025, a commitment in the Africa Strategy, and which would complement the planned opening of an Embassy in Morocco later this year.

## Foreign Policy

461. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on his plans to deepen Ireland's engagement with small island developing nations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13467/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are an important global constituency which is disproportionately impacted by climate change and the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ireland's Strategy for Partnership with Small Island Developing States (SIDS) was launched in June 2019 by the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Simon Coveney TD. The Strategy set out a multi-strand approach to deepening Ireland's relationships with SIDS, building on diplomatic, bilateral, multilateral, and international development links, and fostering closer bonds between our peoples. A partnership approach has been central to the formulation and ongoing implementation of the Strategy, with SIDS consulted regularly to ensure it is relevant to their priorities.

The Strategy is grounded in the ambition set out in *The Global Island* and *Global Ireland* to expand our influence and also reflects the commitment in *A Better World* to strengthen our relationship with SIDS, especially those most vulnerable to climate impact, and to support initiatives which respond to the specific challenges they face. Most recently, the Programme for Government - Our Shared Future – reiterated Ireland's commitment to deepen its relationship with SIDS.

The SIDS' Strategy contains 36 commitments, of which 32 have been fully or partially implemented. They include:

- The establishment of a SIDS' Unit within the Department of Foreign Affairs to lead on SIDS' policy.

- A SIDS Fellowship Programme to bring promising individuals from SIDS to Ireland for Master's-level study.

- A Trust Fund at the Asian Development Bank to support Asian and Pacific SIDS in projects related to climate resilience and disaster risk reduction. €12 million will be contributed to this fund between 2019-2024.

- The establishment of regular dialogues (dubbed Ceill) between Ireland and SIDS to inform our policy positions within the EU, UN and other multilateral fora. An early example was a dialogue between the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and SIDS' representatives at the Our Ocean Wealth conference in Cork in 2019. In addition, a regular cycle of meetings has been developed between the Minister for Finance, Paschal Donohoe, T.D. and his Caribbean counterparts at the World Bank/IMF Spring and Annual Meetings in Washington DC. This is particularly relevant given that Ireland shares a World Bank Constituency with the Caribbean States.

- Irish support for the SAMOA pathway within the UN, which aims to ensure SIDS-related issues remain high on the UN agenda and to support sustainable development in SIDS - not least by mitigating the effects of climate change. The mid-term review of the process was co-facilitated by Ireland's Ambassador to the UN in New York, Ambassador Geraldine Byrne-Nason, with President Higgins addressing a SIDS' Summit at the UN. In 2020 Ireland funded the recruitment of an expert to work on SIDS issues within the UN Secretariat.

In addition to these measures, in 2020 my Department undertook its first-ever SIDS-specific humanitarian response, working through the International Federation of the Red Cross and Asian Development Bank in the area of pandemic preparedness and education in SIDS. Ireland provided €3.4m for these activities.

Ireland is also working to deepen our bilateral policy engagement with SIDS and last October I launched a series of dialogues aimed at bringing together sectoral experts from Ireland and SIDS to discuss policy in areas of mutual interest. Last week I hosted a dialogue on Diaspora engagement with representatives of 12 Caribbean and African SIDS and I will host a second dialogue with Pacific States at the end of the month.

The development and implementation of the Strategy has helped Ireland to deepen its relationship with SIDS and we are perhaps more engaged with this important group than ever before. Importantly, the structures we have put in place will ensure the sustainability of these efforts over the years to come.

### **Shannon Airport Facilities**

462. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs further to Parliamentary Question No. 367 of 24 February 2021, if the figure of 84 crew rest stopovers refers to the number of crew members or the number of US military aircraft flights that made stopovers during the period between 1 February 2020 and 31 January 2021; the number of passengers and crew who stayed overnight during this period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13486/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The figure in question refers to the number of US military aircraft landings during the twelve month period under reference.

The Department of Foreign Affairs has no role in the accommodation arrangements for US military personnel on such stopovers.

### **Passport Applications**

463. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a passport application will be issued to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13510/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** 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 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. First time applications can only be processed in cases of emergency.

Applicants who require a passport for emergency purposes, or to travel for urgent reasons, should contact the Passport Service via our Customer Service Hub Webchat function on our

website.

With regard to the specific application about which the Deputy has enquired, an official from the Passport Service was in contact with the applicant on 8 March to provide an update on the status of the passport application.

### **Human Rights**

464. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on the current situation in Ethiopia; if he has received representations regarding concerns over the situation of the Oromo community in the country; if action is being taken at European Union level; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13535/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** The ongoing armed conflict between the Federal Government of Ethiopia and the former regional authorities in Tigray, which began on 4 November, remains a major concern for Ireland. The conflict has had a devastating impact on the population of Tigray, and poses severe risks to the stability of Ethiopia and the wider Horn of Africa region.

Ireland strongly supports calls by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights for independent, impartial, thorough and transparent investigations into alleged serious violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law in Tigray, to ensure accountability and, where appropriate, justice.

On 26 February, Amnesty International reported that hundreds of unarmed civilians were massacred in Axum last November and that these crimes were perpetrated mainly by Eritrean troops.

The EU most recently discussed the situation in Ethiopia at the Foreign Affairs Council on 22 February, following a visit to Ethiopia and Sudan by the Finnish Foreign Minister on behalf of High Representative Borrell. Minister Coveney spoke with his Finnish counterpart both before and after his visit. Ireland supports the EU's call for the withdrawal of Eritrean troops from Ethiopia, whose presence remains a barrier to humanitarian access and is linked to these and other alleged atrocities.

Ireland raised the Tigray situation at the UN Security Council on 3 February and again on 4 March, expressing deep concern at the humanitarian situation in Tigray and calling for unhindered humanitarian access. Ireland also called on all parties in Tigray to comply with their obligations under international humanitarian law and human rights law including those related to the protection of civilians and prevention of sexual and gender-based violence.

Ireland will continue to advocate for an urgent response to the humanitarian situation, and for a peaceful resolution to the conflict through bilateral engagement, our EU membership and also at the UN Security Council, where we remain actively engaged with other Council members on further ways to address the crisis. Minister Coveney continues to raise these issues with key interlocutors, including with his counterparts in the region. He has condemned reported atrocities and identity-based attacks, and has called for the human rights of all Ethiopians to be upheld.

My Department, through Irish Aid, has provided over €2.6 million to date to support the humanitarian response to the Tigray crisis. This includes €1.4 million to Irish NGOs within Tigray, €500,000 to the UN refugee agency to support the refugee response in neighbouring Sudan, and almost €750,000 towards humanitarian stocks, and supports for the protection of

women and girls.

Unrest in other parts of Ethiopia, including Oromia Region and Benshangul-Gumuz, is also of concern. The Embassy of Ireland in Addis Ababa continues to monitor these situations closely in cooperation with our EU and UN partners.

Ethiopia will hold general elections on 5 June. Ireland looks forward to free, fair and inclusive elections on that date.

### **Departmental Advertising**

465. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the amount spent across his Department on advertising relating to Covid-19 by month and by media outlet (details supplied) from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021. [13559/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** My Department has incurred no expenditure on external advertising in relation to Covid-19. My Department has made extensive use of our online resources in the dissemination of information and advice, particularly in regard to international travel and the provision of consular assistance. This has included a major overhaul of the travel advice section of the dfa.ie website and those of our Missions abroad. My Department also provides regular input to the central Government led Covid-19 communications campaign and to the Covid-19 information hub on the gov.ie website.

### **Defence Forces Recruitment**

466. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence if a recruitment drive for the Defence Forces School of Music will occur during the first half of 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12708/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The military authorities have advised that Defence Forces School of Music recruitment competitions are anticipated in the first half of 2021.

### **Defence Forces Personnel**

467. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence the number of fully qualified air traffic controllers within the Air Corps; and the average length of time it takes to qualify as an air traffic controller. [12709/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** For reasons of operational security, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the current strength of Air Traffic Controllers within the Air Corps.

The average length of time it takes to qualify as an air traffic controller can vary. Enlisted ranks may not be required to complete Radar training and so, on completion of Aerodrome (Tower) training, are classified as qualified ATC controllers. This training takes on average 12 – 18 months. Officers must successfully complete both Aerodrome (Tower) and Radar Training which takes 3.5 years approximately.

## **Defence Forces**

468. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the steps that have been taken to date regarding the Workplace Relations Commission ruling in December 2020 for a comprehensive review of training and information materials and local practices to ensure they are in line with anti-discrimination law due to be completed by the end of 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12778/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Equality, diversity and inclusion are key priorities for the Defence Organisation. In that regard, the organisation is committed to promoting equality of opportunity for all personnel and to ensuring that the principles of equality are reflected in employment policies, procedures and instructions.

These commitments are exemplified in the 2016 Defence Forces Equality Policy and in the Defence Forces Diversity and Inclusion Strategy Statement and Action Plan. Furthermore, the organisation has also recently published its third Action Plan for the Implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and related resolutions (2020-2024), which sets out the Defence Forces commitment to promoting gender equality as well as strengthening women's participation and protection across a range of settings, including conflict settings.

The WRC ruling of December 2020 is currently being considered by the military authorities with the intention of ensuring that all of the organisation's practices, procedures and training are fully aligned and compatible with the provisions of the relevant legislation and that any follow-on actions, will be progressed in line with the timelines set out in the ruling.

## **Defence Forces**

469. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the steps that have been taken to date regarding the Workplace Relations Commission ruling in December 2020 to roll out an anti-discrimination training course and materials for all Defence personnel with staff responsibilities due to be completed by the end of 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12779/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Equality, diversity and inclusion are priorities for the Defence Organisation. In that regard, the organisation is committed to promoting equality of opportunity for all personnel and to ensuring that the principles of equality are reflected in employment policies, procedures and instructions.

These commitments are exemplified in the 2016 Defence Forces Equality Policy and in the Defence Forces Diversity and Inclusion Strategy Statement and Action Plan.

The WRC ruling of December 2020 is currently being considered by the military authorities with a view to ensuring that all of the training programmes and materials for Defence Forces personnel are fully aligned and compatible with the provisions of the relevant legislation and that follow-on actions will be progressed in line with the timelines set out in the ruling.

## **Departmental Internships**

470. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Defence the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under his aegis in 2019; the cost in terms of wages and allowances; and the estimated numerical capacity of

State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis. [12950/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The only State body under the aegis of my Department is the Army Pensions Board. The Army Pensions Board is an independent statutory body established under the Army Pensions Act 1927 to assess the level of disablement, whether it is attributable to military service, and to report to the Minister thereon. The only staff post is the secretary to the Board, which is provided from the staff of the Department. My Department did not offer any work experience or internships to students through that body in 2019, nor is it possible to provide work experience or internship on an annual basis with the Army Pensions Board.

### **Defence Forces Investigations**

471. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence the progress of an investigation in the Defence Forces into the involvement of one or more members of same with the far right (details supplied). [13136/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I am informed by the Military Authorities that there is an ongoing active Military Police investigation into this matter, therefore it would not be appropriate for me to comment at this time.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

472. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence if he will provide details of the role of the Office of Emergency Planning throughout the Covid-19 pandemic; and the resources of and the ability of the office to monitor potential national security threats such as Covid-19 in order to better prepare for same. [13321/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** At a National level, I chair the Government Task Force on Emergency Planning, which oversees and ensures the fullest level of co-ordination and cooperation regarding our national and strategic emergency management. The ongoing work of this Task Force has continued during COVID-19. The Office of Emergency Planning, which is established within the Department of Defence, is directly involved in supporting myself as Chair of the Task Force and the Departments who form its membership. This support includes work on areas such as critical infrastructure resilience, risk management and emergency communications. The Office of Emergency Planning also manages and operates the National Emergency Coordination Centre and leads on public safety information campaigns, such as “Be Winter Ready” and “Be Summer Ready”.

The Office of Emergency Planning, with the participation and assistance of all Government Departments and Agencies and Dublin City University Business School, prepared the National Risk Assessment for Ireland 2020 which was recently adopted by the Government Task Force and which I will present to Government shortly. The purpose of the National Risk Assessment, which is undertaken on a three yearly cycle, is to identify the key risks facing the State across a broad range of emergencies, to assess the likelihood and impact of these risks and to inform actions at a national level aimed at mitigating such risks. It provides a basis for establishing priorities with regard to risk mitigation at national level and to inform Government decisions regarding resource allocation. It replaces the National Risk Assessment for Ireland 2017.

In the event of an emergency at a National level or threats posed by an emerging emergency

situation, the *Strategic Emergency Management National Structures and Framework*, approved by Government in July 2017, outlines the Lead Government Department principle and how this is applied across a “whole of Government” approach to managing such responses, including pandemics. The Government Task Force oversaw the development of this Framework based on extensive engagement with the Lead Government Departments. The Office of Emergency Planning provides support to these structures in the event of an emergency response being deemed necessary by the Lead Department responsible. Due to the severity of the impact on public health and economic life presented by COVID-19, adapted structures were introduced to manage these risks as envisaged in the *Strategic Emergency Management National Structures and Framework* .

As Chair of the Government Task Force, I am satisfied that these response arrangements provide a coordinated whole of Government approach.

### Defence Forces Veterans

473. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence the reason for not establishing the office of veterans’ affairs as previously committed to; and his plans for this office and veterans’ welfare. [13322/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** My Department formally recognises two veterans’ organisations as representing all former personnel, namely, the Irish United Nations Veterans Association (IUNVA) and Óglaigh Náisiúnta na hÉireann (ONE), the Organisation of National Ex-Service Personnel. Service Level Agreements (SLAs) have been agreed with these organisations, which set out the services and financial supports that the Department provides.

In recent years both associations have received increases to their grant allocations. The programme for Government also contains a commitment to further develop the supports to veterans. Furthermore, my Department has secured funding under the Dormant Accounts Fund Action Plan 2020 to assist them with specific special projects and has also provided further supports in developing the network of centres.

I am aware that the associations have proposed a range of further supports that would be available to former members of the Defence Forces. My Department has engaged with them on exploring further these proposals.

### Defence Forces Strength

474. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence the current strength versus the establishment of the Defence Forces personnel support service; and the status of the current capability of the service to support the welfare of Defence Forces personnel. [13323/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The PSS consists of a team of trained military personnel and occupational social workers located throughout the Defence Forces. The service is fully staffed, with 19 NCOs employed as Barrack Personnel Support Officers (BPSSO), and 9 full and part time Occupational Social Workers (OSW). One BPSSO appointment is vacant in 2 BDE as a result of the promotion of the incumbent and it is expected that this will be filled shortly. One BPSSO is currently deployed as BPSSO in UNIFIL and he will be replaced on rotation.

## Naval Service

475. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence the current strength verses establishment of the Naval Service fleet operational readiness standards and training; and the status of the effective capability of FORST at present. [13324/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** FORST, the Fleet Operational Readiness Standards and Training Unit, established in 2008, is responsible for the co-ordination of the Naval Service fleets needs. Its purpose is to ensure the delivery by the Naval Service of professional output with a high degree of certainty, specific fleet standards, quality control and the monitoring of personnel and equipment in action.

The Naval Service conducts detailed and regular operational readiness evaluation for its ships at sea where procedures are assessed, evaluated and compared with international best practice.

The Fleet Operational Readiness Standards and Training Unit has an establishment of 12 personnel. The current strength is 11 personnel. I am advised that the vacancy, which is as a result of a planned retirement, will be filled in due course.

## Departmental Advertising

476. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Defence the amount spent across his Department on advertising in relation to Covid-19 by month and by media outlet (details supplied) from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021. [13555/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** My Department has had no expenditure on advertising in relation to Covid-19 in any media outlet from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021.

## Schools Building Projects

477. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Education the status of a building project for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12479/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The school to which the Deputy refers was approved funding under the Additional Accommodation Scheme 2018 to facilitate construction of three classrooms, one resource room, two standard WC and one WC for assisted users.

A Stage 1 submission was received in my Department which indicated that there are site restrictions applicable to the project, which had cost implications for its delivery. A site visit was carried out by officials from the Department's Professional & Technical Team on the 5th October 2020 with a view to progressing this project. A revised scope of works has been co-ordinated with the school to build a two-storey extension for four classrooms, four resource rooms, one meeting room, toilets and social space, along with the refurbishment of an existing room to a new science lab with prep area.

My Department is currently awaiting a revised Stage 1 report to include an updated cost plan for this new scope of works.

## State Examinations

478. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education if clarification will be provided on the practical aspects of some exam subjects (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12483/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** On 17 February, I confirmed that Leaving Certificate 2021 examinations will proceed and students will also have the option of applying for grades accredited by the State Examinations Commission (SEC), to be known as SEC-Accredited Grades.

This decision followed 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.

It is my view that students must be afforded the choice as to whether to sit the examinations, including the oral and coursework components, as it would be entirely unfair to students to require them to participate in these elements, given the disruption in learning which has occurred. The oral and coursework components of the examinations will not form part of the Accredited Grade process.

However, when estimating marks for the Accredited Grades, teachers will be asked to consider the student's progress and likely performance across all components of the subject – oral, practical, projects and written. This will ensure that the estimated mark submitted by the school to the SEC reflects the candidate's work and progress across all aspects of the subject.

Further information is available in *A Guide to State Examinations and Accredited Grades for Leaving Certificate 2021* which has been published on [www.gov.ie/leavingcertificate](http://www.gov.ie/leavingcertificate). This guide has also been communicated to schools.

The Guide provides information regarding coursework and 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.

The State Examinations Commission has also recently published and sent to schools further information in relation to the arrangements for the Leaving Certificate examinations. Included in this document are details in relation to Coursework Completion dates and Orals, Practicals and Music Practical Performance Tests. The document is available on the SEC website as circular S07/21.

### **Third Level Education**

479. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education her plans to tackle the emerging anomaly in relation to Gaeltacht fees being charged to third level students who are studying to become post-primary teachers while third-level students studying to become primary teachers are not required to pay such fees given that both sets of students must complete mandatory period of time in the Gaeltacht as part of the masters courses; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12509/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The current requirements for the Gaeltacht Learning Period (GLP) for primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes takes the form of 2 x 2 week placement as outlined in the Teaching Council's *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education*.

The Teaching Council Curricular Subject Requirements sets out the requirements for each of the approved curricular subjects in order to be eligible to register as a post primary teacher with the Council. For Gaeilge, these include a two month residential experience requirement. The registration requirements require graduates to be eligible to teach at least one curricular subject to the highest level within the post-primary schools curriculum.

The Gaeltacht Learning Period (GLP) is a compulsory element of all primary ITE programmes and one which must be met by primary ITE graduates in order to register with the Teaching Council. The primary Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) have developed an agreed syllabus for delivery by their Gaeltacht college providers, in order to comply with the current requirements for the GLP for primary ITE programmes as outlined in the Teaching Council's *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education*.

Attendance at a programme of study in a Gaeltacht college is not a compulsory requirement for post-primary student teachers, unlike primary. As part of the current curricular subject requirements set by the Teaching Council for all post-primary languages (including Gaeilge), there is a residential experience requirement of a period of 2 months/8 weeks. Verifiable residential experience may be evidenced in a number of ways including:

- A copy of transcript of results which confirms residency in the country/area.
- A letter/statement from an employer/college/landlord in that country. For the subject of Irish/Gaeilge, the letter should evidence residency in a Gaeltacht area.
- For the subject of Irish/Gaeilge, evidence of being a native of a Gaeltacht area may be submitted or a letter/statement from a Gaelcholaiste confirming that attendance at a Post Primary Gaelcholáiste to Leaving Certificate level.

In light of the emergency measures being adopted in relation to Covid -19, the Teaching

Council has introduced changes in relation to the residential experience requirement for graduates of post-primary languages programmes of ITE in summer 2021. These changes include the reduction of the requirement to 6 weeks given the current restrictions on travel and also student teachers who have not fully met the 6-week requirement when applying for registration with the Council, will be granted registration with conditions.

### Third Level Education

480. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education the reason third-level students attending Gaeltacht courses as part of mandatory training for their professional masters of education are required to pay €650 per week for a course that has to take place online in 2021 due to Covid-19 (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12510/21]

495. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fact that students studying a master’s in education with a college (details supplied) have been informed they have to pay €1,300 to complete a fully online Gaeltacht course undertaken at home in summer 2021; her views on whether this is a very high price given the course provider will not now have to incur the cost of food, lodgings and room rental generally associated with the Gaeltacht experience; her plans to deal with this issue; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12770/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 480 and 495 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.

The Department of Education 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 the Department of Education 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 that College, the Department of Education has recently responded to a proposal from that College confirming that both the Department and the Teaching Council has no issue with that College, working in collaboration with a Gaeltacht College(s) to provide an online programme based on the agreed syllabus for their own students and to negotiate and set the cost for undertaking that programme for their own students.

The Department understands that the College referred to by the Deputy has now organised the provision of an online GLP programme for all of their students in collaboration with one Gaeltacht College.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

481. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the difficulties faced by substitute school teachers who are unable to progress on the pay point scale due to school closures; her plans to address this situation in order that teachers are not disadvantaged by school closures due to the lockdown; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12513/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** During the Covid-19 pandemic, substitute teachers with a contract (written or verbal) covering an approved absence receive payment for the duration of that contract. The period of service that the teachers is paid for is reckonable towards incremental progression on the payscale.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

482. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fact that many substitute teachers will lose out on panel rights due to the ongoing school closures; her plans to address this situation in order that teachers awaiting panel rights are not disadvantaged by school closures due to lockdown; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12514/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The core function of the redeployment arrangements is to facilitate the redeployment of all surplus permanent teachers to other schools that have vacancies. Thereafter, schools are required under the panel arrangements to fill permanent vacancies from supplementary panels comprised of eligible fixed-term (temporary/substitute) and part-time teachers.

The criteria, reviewed annually with the Education Partners, are published on the Department website. Circular 78/2020 sets out the arrangements for the Supplementary Panel for the 2021/22 school year.

While school buildings were closed due to COVID-19, schools continued to provide remote learning and substitution for approved leave is permitted during this period.

### **Special Educational Needs Staff**

483. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education if she will support making the national training programme for special needs assistants a fully accredited and recognised FE-TAC level 7 award; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12528/21]

**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. The main purpose of the programme was to provide professional development and not the provision of a qualification. 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

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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.

### **School Admissions**

484. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education if a school place can be provided in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12540/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** In relation to school admissions, it is the responsibility of the managerial authorities of all schools to implement an enrolment policy in accordance with the Education Act, 1998 and the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 . My Department's main responsibility is to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all pupils seeking school places in that area.

Parents have the right to choose which school to apply to and where the school has places available the pupil should be admitted. However, in schools where there are more applicants than places available, a selection process will be necessary.

The Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 act requires schools to clearly set out their selection criteria in their admission policies. Schools have discretion in relation to their admis-

sion criteria and how they are applied. This selection process and the enrolment policy on which it is based must be non-discriminatory and must be applied fairly in respect of all applicants. Nonetheless, where a school is oversubscribed some pupils may not obtain a place in the school.

The Educational Welfare Service of the Child and Family Agency (EWS) is the agency which can assist parents who are experiencing difficulty in securing a school place for their child. The EWS can be contacted at 01-7718500 for assistance. More information on school attendance is available on their website on the following link: <https://www.tusla.ie/tess/tess-ews/>.

## **Education Policy**

485. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Education her plans to roll out the in-school and preschool therapy services demonstration project as a national scheme in the future; if so, the areas that will benefit from the next steps; if provision will be made for schools in County Clare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12545/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** A demonstration project to provide in-school and pre-school therapy services took place over the course of the 2018/19 school year.

The project was developed by the Departments of Education, Children and Youth Affairs, Health, and the Health Service Executive and managed and co-ordinated by the National Council for Special Education.

The purpose of the project was to test a model of tailored therapeutic supports by providing speech and language and occupational therapy within 'educational settings'. This innovative pilot complemented existing HSE funded provision of essential therapy services.

The project took place in the Health Service Executive (HSE) Community Healthcare Organisation (CHO) 7 Region of South West Dublin, Kildare and West Wicklow.

75 schools, including a representative sample of primary, post primary, and special schools took part.

75 Pre-school settings associated with primary schools participating in the project were included.

In total 150 settings participated in the demonstration project.

Children who require speech and language therapy services and who are not attending one of the pilot schools continued to access services from the Health Service Executive.

Children attending pilot schools and who received therapy supports from the HSE also continued to access such services. The in-school therapy model was designed to supplement, not to replace existing services.

It was designed to provide for a clinical Speech and Language Therapy service delivery model of Specialist, Targeted and universal supports in line with best practice for pupils which will see them receiving supports along a continuum of provision depending on the extent or severity of needs of the child/pupil.

The project was evaluated over the course of the 2018/19 school year. This evaluation report has now been completed and is available at <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Demo-project-evaluation-fInal-for-web-upload.pdf>

Although initially designed as a one year pilot, a Government decision of 12th February, 2019, in relation to the Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme, also agreed to the establishment of a pilot of a new School Inclusion Model for children with special educational and additional care needs involving up to 75 participating schools in the CHO 7 region over the course of the 2019/20 school year.

The demonstration project to provide in-school and pre-school therapy services continued, as part of the School Inclusion Model, over the course of the 2019/20 school year.

As all schools closed from 12th March, 2020, due to the COVID crisis, it was not possible to fully complete the pilot of the School Inclusion Model over the course of the 2019/20 school year.

In order to support the work of the HSE in responding to COVID, the Speech and Language and Occupational Therapists which had been assigned to the School Inclusion Model were recalled to the HSE from 12th March 2020, and continue to remain employed by the HSE.

Approval has been granted to the NCSE to directly recruit therapists to continue the Pilot of the School Inclusion Model, over the course of the 2020/21 school year, and recruitment of therapists is underway.

However, as schools were closed for a period since January the project was paused.

It was also announced that as part of the 2021 Budget measures, that funding is being made available next year to extent the School Inclusion Model (SIM), which includes therapy provision, to two other pilot areas in 2021. Consideration of the areas to which the project can be extended to and the applicable service model is underway.

### **Schools Building Projects**

486. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Education the status of the progress of a school building project (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12580/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The project to which the Deputy refers has been devolved to the National Development Finance Agency (NDFA) for delivery as part of a programme of school building projects.

This school is in the bundle referred to as 'Project Dargle'. The NDFA is currently preparing for the appointment of a Design Team in respect of this bundle of projects.

At this early stage, it is not possible to provide a timeline for completion of the project; the NDFA will be engaging directly with the school authority to keep it informed of progress.

### **Schools Building Projects**

487. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Education the status of a building project for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12583/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm to the Deputy that the school referred to has been approved for a project under my Department's Additional Accommodation Scheme 2015. This project will provide for two mainstream classrooms with en-

suite, and one WC for assisted users. My Department has also agreed to incorporate a summer works project for an upgrade to the waste water treatment system and the school playground.

The Deputy will be aware that my Department had previously advised that this school was approved to go to Tender. Following this decision, the school confirmed that there were numerous conditions of planning that had not been costed. The school were requested to submit a Stage 2b report with a revised cost plan for assessment. My Department is currently awaiting this documentation which the school has advised will be submitted in the coming weeks.

### **School Staff**

488. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Education the scheduled reduction of staffing numbers for the 2022-2023 academic year at a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12602/21]

489. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Education if she will intervene and reverse the decision to remove the vice-principal position and teaching position in a school (details supplied). [12603/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 488 and 489 together.

The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30 September. The staffing schedule operates in a clear and transparent manner and treats all similar types of schools equally irrespective of location.

Budget 2021 provided for a one point improvement to the staffing schedule for September 2021 and introduces new retention levels for all schools. I have also recently announced a further package of measures, including improved staffing and additional funding for the school completion programme to tackle educational disadvantage in DEIS schools and to assist those students with the highest levels of need to help them reach their potential.

The newly revised staffing schedule for the 2021/22 school year will be published shortly and it is at that stage that schools will be able to establish their staffing for the coming September.

### **Educational Disadvantage**

490. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if she is committed to tackling educational disadvantage as per her press release of 1 March 2021 (details supplied); if so, if she will reverse the decision taken to reduce the staffing numbers for the next academic year at a school; and if not, the reason the school will lose two members of staff at a time when educational support is most needed by its students. [12607/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30 September. The staffing schedule operates in a clear and transparent manner and treats all similar types of schools equally irrespective of location. Budget 2021 provided for a one point improvement to the staffing schedule and introduced new retention levels for all schools. I also recently announced a package of measures, including changes to staffing schedule, and additional funding for the school completion pro-

gramme to tackle educational disadvantage in DEIS schools.

The newly revised staffing schedule for the 2021/22 school year will be published shortly. It is at that stage that schools will be able to establish their staffing for the coming September.

### **School Transport**

491. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education if the school bus pick-up point at the limited car parking space at Ballykeeffe, Kilkenny, facilitating 27 pupils attending schools in Kilkenny city, and which is considered extremely dangerous and unsafe, will be re-located to a much safer location at the car park Kilmanagh village, Kilkenny; if the matter will be expedited; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12613/21]

**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.

Bus Éireann is responsible for the planning and timetabling of school transport routes. Bus Éireann endeavours, within available resources, to ensure that each eligible child has a reasonable level of school transport service in the context of the Scheme nationally. Parents are responsible for ensuring that children are brought safely to and collected safely from Bus Éireann designated pick up and set down points.

Bus Éireann has advised that the pick-up point referred to by the Deputy has been assessed as being suitable as a pick-up point under the School Transport Scheme and diverting the service is not possible due to time constraints.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

492. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education the rationale behind children in primary schools not being required to wear masks; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12676/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** 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 recently confirmed that the wearing of masks by primary school students is not being recommended at this time.

### **Schools Building Projects**

493. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Education the status of a school (details supplied) which is due to open September 2021 and the permanent school which is proposed to be constructed in Corballis, Donabate, County Dublin [12759/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** With regard to the school to which the Deputy refers I can confirm that the school opened in September 2020 in Donabate Portrane Community Centre pending delivery of its interim accommodation on Portrane Road, Donabate. I can also confirm that the contractor commenced on site on 2 March 2021. The anticipated handover of this interim accommodation is late May 2021.

In regards to a permanent site to cater for the projected demographic growth, the acquisition of a zoned school site at Corballis, Donabate is at an advanced stage of legal conveyancing. Officials from my Department are engaging with the landowner and officials in the relevant local authority regarding the potential development of the site.

I am unable to elaborate any further due to the commercial sensitivities of site acquisitions in general.

My Department's officials have kept the school authority fully briefed in relation to this project.

### **Bus Éireann**

494. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Education if the policy of Bus Éireann contracts will be examined in relation to the automatic retirement of drivers when they reach 70 years of age (details supplied); if the retirement age of drivers will be extended to 75 years of age; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12769/21]

**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 4.8kms at post-primary and 3.2kms 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.

*Question No. 495 answered with Question No. 480.*

## Special Educational Needs

496. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education the accommodations and provisions being made in mainstream secondary education for children with mild to moderate learning disability to return to the mainstream classroom in which they have been thriving; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12781/21]

**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 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 support those pupils/students with SEN who are unable to return to in-school teaching and learning under these phases.

At Post Primary level in recognition that not all students with complex special education needs will be back in school in this phase, the supplementary programme for eligible students who have not yet returned to in person learning will be extended by a further two weeks (an additional 10 hours, for a total allocation of 30 hours).

## School Transport

497. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Education further to Parliamentary Question 376 of 17 February 2021, if he will provide details of the membership of the steering group; the number of times and dates on which it has met; the terms of reference of same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12797/21]

**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.

### **State Examinations**

498. **Deputy John Paul Phelan** asked the Minister for Education if students repeating their leaving certificate in 2021 will be eligible to submit their practical projects for grading in the 2021 exam which were not graded in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12813/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The State Examinations Commission (SEC) has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

### **State Examinations**

499. **Deputy John Paul Phelan** asked the Minister for Education if measures will be taken for the leaving certificate 2021 to accommodate the needs of students repeating the exams from 2020 that take cognisance of the fact that the 2020 and 2021 academic years have been extraordinary in the context of all previous academic years; and if she will make a statement on the

matter. [12814/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** On 17 February, I confirmed that Leaving Certificate 2021 examinations will proceed and students will also have the alternative option of applying for grades accredited by the State Examinations Commission (SEC), to be known as SEC-Accredited Grades.

This decision followed 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.

Last August, I announced a series of changes that would be made to assessment arrangements for both Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations for 2021. This announcement was accompanied by a published document detailing these changes, Assessment Arrangements for Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate Examinations 2021, and forms part of the Roadmap for the Full Return to School. On 21 December 2020, my Department published an updated version of the publication which includes clarifications in relation to a number of subjects.

These arrangements are designed to take account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during the 2019/20 school year and to factor in for some further possible loss of learning time in the 2020/21 school year as a contingency measure. As the loss of learning through school closures affects students' engagement with their course of study in different ways, the adjustments put in place play to students' strengths by leaving intact the familiar overall structure of the examinations, while incorporating additional choice. The adjustments were arrived at through discussions between my Department, the State Examinations Commission (SEC), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and key stakeholders.

These changes to the national assessment arrangements were made with due regard for the principles of equity, fairness and integrity, as these principles apply to assessment and examinations and refer to student to-student, subject-to-subject, and year-to-year comparisons over time. The changes provide reassurance to students, their parents/guardians, teachers and schools.

The State Examinations Commission also advised schools in December of flexibility being provided for schools and students in the arrangements for the completion and authentication of coursework. The State Examinations Commission provided an update in relation to the arrangements for the delivery of the Leaving Certificate examinations, including an update in relation to coursework, following the announcement by the Government on Wednesday 17 February. That circular is available at <https://www.examinations.ie/misc-doc/EN-EX-94915644.pdf>

In addition to the adjustment to the assessment arrangements for the examinations previ-

ously communicated to schools, further adjustments will be made to the written papers. These further adjustments will aim to reduce the load on students, leaving intact the general overall structure of the written examination papers. In the majority of cases these adjustments will involve reducing the number of questions that students will be required to answer. The duration of the examinations will remain the same as set out in the published timetable, thus providing students with additional time to read the paper and answer the required number of questions.

Further subject-by-subject information in relation to these adjustments will be issued by the SEC in the week of 22 March.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

500. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education the estimated timeline for the introduction of special schools from 50% to 100% capacity in the next few weeks; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12819/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I want to assure the Deputy that I am conscious of the fact that closing schools has hugely adverse consequences at individual, family and societal level and that the effect on children with complex special educational needs can be even greater.

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. Special schools returned to full-time in-school education on 1 March.

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.

### **School Transport**

501. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the timeline for the interim report for school transport to be made available; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12827/21]

**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.

It is planned that the Steering Group will report to me on an interim basis as the review progresses, with a view to presenting a final report later this year with recommendations on the future operation of the Department's School Transport Scheme.

### School Admissions

502. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education the status of admissions to a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12838/21]

**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 €2bn 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 where increases in population and other issues have led to concerns regarding a shortage of school places.

I can assure the Deputy that the 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.

The admission policies of schools are the remit of the Board of Management of each school and, as such, the NCSE has no role in relation to the number of applicants or waiting lists. Once

schools notify NCSE of vacancies within their specialist provision, SENOs work locally to ensure parents are made aware of these special class places.

I am assured that the local SENO is currently engaging with, and remains available, to support these families in finding a suitable placement.

### **School Transport**

503. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education if refunds will be issued to parents of pupils on the school transport scheme that have not been attending school and therefore not availing of the service. [12847/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the current school year over 113,100 children, including over 14,500 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

The purpose of the Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

The decision taken by the Government not to re-open schools on the 6th January 2021 was taken in the interest of protecting our pupils, their families, teachers and those members of the wider community and is one of the many measures taken to support efforts to contain the spread of Covid-19.

The matter of refunds on the cost of school transport tickets for the period of school closures in the 2020/2021 school year will be considered at the end of the current school year.

### **Education Policy**

504. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Education her plans to ensure that fifth year students can be facilitated to catch up on class time lost due to school closures in 2021 and any associated gaps in the coverage of their curriculum in advance of leaving certificate 2022; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12856/21]

**Minister for Education and Skills (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. Since Monday 11 January 2021, all students, including students currently in fifth year, are engaging in a programme of remote learning with their schools.

The public health restrictions which resulted in the closure of schools in March 2020 highlighted the absolute necessity for schools to be agile in providing for continuity of schooling in the future. As a contingency measure against the possibility of partial or full school closures, my Department 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](http://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](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool).

The [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://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.

### **Schools Building Projects**

505. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Education if the case of a school (details supplied) has been brought to her attention; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12876/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm to the Deputy that this school was granted approval and funding to construct 1 mainstream classroom and 4 Special Education Rooms (prefab replacement) under the Department's Additional Accommodation Scheme in October 2018.

A Tender report was received by the Department in February 2021. It was noted that additional funding would be required for this project and this request is currently under review. The School Authorities will be advised of the Department's decision regarding this matter in due course.

*Questions - Written Answers*  
**Schools Building Projects**

506. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education if she will approve a request for extra funding for a school (details supplied) in order that it can proceed with the necessary development; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12883/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm to the Deputy that this school was granted approval and funding to construct 1 mainstream classroom and 4 Special Education Rooms (prefab replacement) under the Department's Additional Accommodation Scheme in October 2018.

A Tender report was received by the Department in February 2021. It was noted that additional funding would be required for this project and this request is currently under review. The School Authorities will be advised of the Department's decision regarding this matter in due course.

**Schools Amalgamation**

507. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Education the details of plans for the amalgamation of three secondary schools (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12896/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm to the Deputy that my Department approved the amalgamation of the three post primary schools, in question, following lengthy discussions with the relevant Patron bodies.

One of the schools referred to has been chosen as the future location for the newly amalgamated school. My Department recently approved a large capital project under the Additional School Accommodation Scheme and this has been agreed and devolved to the school authority for delivery. The three schools will continue to operate from their existing school sites until this additional accommodation has been delivered which has also been agreed by the relevant Patron bodies.

**Schools Amalgamation**

508. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Education the details of the budget for the amalgamation of three secondary schools (details supplied); if provision is being made for the inclusion of a new gym, canteen and car parking facilities; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12897/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm to the Deputy that my Department has approved a significant capital project, under the Additional School Accommodation Scheme for the amalgamation in question. My Department has approved the following accommodation:

- 6 x 58m<sup>2</sup> Mainstream classrooms
- 3 x 15m<sup>2</sup> SET rooms
- 2 x Science laboratories and shared prep area
- 1 x Home Economics room

1 x Textiles room

1 x Art room

1 x Technology room and prep area

1 x DCG/Tech Graps room

2 Class SEN Base

This project has been agreed and devolved to the school authority for delivery. Due to commercial sensitivities the budget cannot be released. The brief does not include a new PE Hall, GP dining or car parking facilities as such accommodation does not fall under the remit of the Additional School Accommodation Scheme. The patrons of the three schools, in question, were informed of the parameters of the Additional School Accommodation Scheme at the time of application and agreed to proceed with the project brief.

The immediate priority of my Department is providing 20,000 new and replacement school places each year, to ensure that every child has access to a physical school place.

As the Deputy is aware, 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, to include the building and modernisation of PE facilities in post-primary schools.

Under Project Ireland 2040, we will invest €8.4 billion in primary and post primary school buildings. The government is committed to a PE Hall build and modernisation programme, starting in the second half of the Project Ireland 2040 period.

It is open to the school patron to apply for ancillary accommodation, if required, under form SLE which is available at [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie), this application will be considered under future rounds of major capital funding.

### **Schools Building Projects**

509. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education the status of projects in schools (details supplied) approved under the National Development Finance Agency, NDFA, Devolved Programme. [12901/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the Deputy is aware, the projects to which he refers have been devolved to the National Development Finance Agency (NDFA) for delivery as part of bundled school building programmes.

In respect of the two projects referred to that are located in Mullingar, Co. Westmeath, both projects are in the bundle referred to as 'Project Nore'. I'm pleased to inform the Deputy that both of these projects have been approved to Stage 2b (of the architectural planning process) by the Department.

The remaining projects to which the Deputy refers are in the bundle referred to as 'Project Dargle'. The NDFA is currently preparing for the appointment of a Design Team for this bundle.

At this early stage, it is not possible to provide a timeline for completion of the projects;

the NDFA will be engaging directly with relevant school authorities to keep them informed of progress.

### **Schools Building Projects**

510. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education the amount spent on developing phase 1 of the extension to a school (details supplied) in County Limerick which was scrapped in 2018; the amount that has been spent on developing stage 2 of this project since 2018; the reason for the delay in approving the stage 2(a) submission made by the education and training board, ETB, in November 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12915/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The project to which the Deputy refers has been devolved for delivery to Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board (ETB).

To date, approximately €346,306 has been spent on costs related to the project incorporating design team fees and surveys. This also includes an amount of €46,012 spent in the initial stages of this project.

The Stage 2A submission was received in my Department in December 2020 and all reports are being assessed as expeditiously as possible.

I am pleased to confirm that the Stage 2A meeting with my Department, the ETB and the Design Team is scheduled for the first week of April. Once the Stage 2(a) submission is approved by my Department, the next step for the ETB's Design Team will be to obtain the statutory planning approvals. When these are in place, the project can proceed to tender and construction. It is not possible at this stage to provide a timeline for the completion of the project.

### **DEIS Scheme**

511. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Education the progress with regard to a school (details supplied) becoming included in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DEIS; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12933/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** A detailed analysis of school enrolment data and the latest data available from Census 2016, using the HP Deprivation Index, was carried out by members of the DEIS Technical Group. This group contains representatives of the Department's Statistics and Social Inclusion Units, the Inspectorate and the Educational Research Centre. My Department commenced a consultation process with education stakeholder representatives on the technical aspects and implementation of the model, and work is ongoing on final elements of the model. It is envisaged that this will then provide the basis for development of a DEIS resource allocation system to match resources to identified need. Until this work is complete, it is not intended to extend the DEIS programme to any further schools.

### **DEIS Scheme**

512. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Education the progress with regard to a school (details supplied) becoming included in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DEIS; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12934/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** A detailed analysis of school enrolment data and the latest data available from Census 2016, using the HP Deprivation Index, was carried out by members of the DEIS Technical Group. This group contains representatives of the Department's Statistics and Social Inclusion Units, the Inspectorate and the Educational Research Centre. My Department commenced a consultation process with education stakeholder representatives on the technical aspects and implementation of the model, and work is ongoing on final elements of the model. It is envisaged that this will then provide the basis for development of a DEIS resource allocation system to match resources to identified need. Until this work is complete, it is not intended to extend the DEIS programme to any further schools.

### **Special Educational Needs**

513. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education the level of engagement she has had with both parents and stakeholders in identifying and providing an autism spectrum disorder, ASD, unit for primary education facilities in Ballincollig, County Cork; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12940/21]

**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 to identify any and all relevant suitable placements.

The NCSE has advised that they are actively engaged with all of the Primary and Post Primary Schools in the Ballincollig area regarding the establishment of special class provision. Engagement with schools has now reached an advanced stage with those schools committed to the establishment of special classes progressing applications for the additional accommodation

required to ensure a timely provision of classes over the coming years.

The NCSE's local Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs) continue to be available to assist and advise both schools and the parents of children with special educational needs. Parents may contact SENOs directly using the contact details available at: <https://ncse.ie/regional-services-contact-list>. Information on the list of schools with special classes is available at [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

## Education Policy

514. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education if she will provide a full list of participating organisations, unions and advocacy groups that contributed to talks held to get agreement on the reopening of special schools, special classes and also the general reopening of education for children and young persons; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12945/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** 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.

A full list of Stakeholders at post primary include the National Association of Principals and Deputy Principals, Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools, Joint Managerial Body Education and Educational Training Boards Ireland and the Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland, Teachers Union Ireland, Irish Second Level Students Union, and the National Parents Council Post Primary.

Engagement with primary bodies included the National Parents Council, the Catholic Primary School Management Association, Church of Ireland Board of Education, National Association of Board of Management in Special Education, An Foras Pátrúnacha, Educate Together, Muslim Primary Education Board, Education and Training Boards Ireland, Irish National Teachers Organisation, Fórsa and the Irish Primary Principals Network.

There was also engagement with individual parents, schools and advocacy groups including AsIAm, Down Syndrome Ireland, Inclusions Ireland, Family Carers Ireland, LEAP Ireland, the Ombudsman for Children, and the Disability Federation of Ireland, among others.

My Department also had ongoing engagements with the Department of Health, HSE, and Department of Public Health HSE.

## Departmental Internships

515. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under her aegis in 2019; the cost in terms of wages and allowances; and the estimated numerical capacity of State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis. [12951/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Information in respect of work experience and internships in the non-commercial state bodies under the remit of my Department, is

not routinely compiled by my Department.

The state bodies within the scope of the Deputy's question may be contacted directly by e-mail as set out in the attached document.

#### Contact E-Mail Addresses for State Bodies under the Remit of the Department of Education

Name of Body	Dedicated Email address for the Members of the Oireachtas	Designated Official Responsible for assisting Oireachtas Members
An Chomhairle um Oideachais Gaeltachta agus Gaelscolaíochta (Note 1)	oireachtas@cogg.ie	muireann@cogg.ie
Educational Research Centre	oireachtas.queries@erc.ie	jude.cosgrove@erc.ie
National Centre for Guidance in Education	oireachtas@ncge.ie	Jennifer.mckenzie@ncge.ie
National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (Note 2)	oireactasqueries@ncca.ie	Aine.ArmstrongFarrell@ncca.ie
State Examinations Commission	Oireachtas@examinations.ie	Paddy.Quinn@examinations.ie
The Teaching Council	pqrep@teachingcouncil.ie	Tomás Ó Ruairc
National Council for Special Education	oireachtasqueries@ncse.ie	patrick.martin@ncse.ie and cindyjane.oconnell@ncse.ie
Residential Institutions Statutory Fund - Caranua	Oireachtas@caranua.ie	jane.merrigan@caranua.ie.

Note 1 – The designated officer responsible within An Chomhairle um Oideachais Gaeltachta is Muireann Ní Mhóráin

Note 2 - The spelling of the NCCA e-mail address to which Oireachtas queries may be addressed has been verified with the NCCA as being accurate.

### Broadband Infrastructure

516. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Education when a school (details supplied) will receive appropriate broadband services; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12985/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Under the School Broadband Programme the Department continually reviews the availability of services and upgrades schools where the opportunity arises, in line with contractual and budgetary requirements. Currently investment of some €13m is allocated annually for the provision of internet connectivity to schools. 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 school referred to by the Deputy is currently on the best available service of 25mb fibre broadband connection, which is a dedicated service to the school. The school was included in a recent tender in line with contractual requirements, to renew the broadband service to the

school, with final tender responses due shortly. Following the evaluation process of this tender, the school will be contacted in due course to arrange the new service, and it is hoped this may deliver higher speed connectivity.

The National Broadband Plan Intervention Area Plan implementation is now underway, and as announced recently, the provision of high speed connectivity to the almost 700 primary schools in that area is to be accelerated for delivery by the end of 2022. My Department is engaging with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications on the intervention area implementation, including the Schools Broadband Connection Points Programme.

### **School Discipline**

517. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Education the guidance issued by her Department on the use of physical interventions such as restraint and seclusion in schools; when the working group established within her Department to examine this issue will complete its work and publish its findings; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13012/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The Board of Management of each school is responsible for the care and safety of all of the pupils in their school. Schools should supervise and support children who are distressed or out of control until they have recovered and are able to re-engage in the classroom. In some circumstances this may mean the temporary removal of a child from the environment where the problems have arisen.

Schools owe a duty of care to all their students and any action taken in relation to managing behaviour must be proportionate.

Tusla's Educational Welfare Service has published guidelines for schools on Codes of Behaviour which all schools are required by law to have in place. The guidelines advise that specialised behaviour management strategies, should not be used without expert advice, training and monitoring. In particular, the guidelines point to certain sanctions which are regarded as inappropriate, including leaving a student in an unsupervised situation while in the care of the school. All parents must be made aware of behaviour management strategies employed by the school.

Schools may seek advice from their local National Educational Psychological Services psychologist, from the NCSE's Support Service which includes Special Educational Needs Organisers, the National Behavioural Support Service and the Special Education Support Service, as to how children with behavioural needs can best be supported in school.

A range of guidance is available for schools in relation to the management of student behaviour. The Department published Guidelines for Supporting Pupils with Behavioural, Emotional, and Social Difficulties, which is available on the Department's website, *www.education.ie*. The National Educational Psychological Services document Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties – A Continuum of Support also provides advice for teachers, including some advice on the use of "time out" procedures in the classroom.

Training is available for schools in relation to the provision of support for children with special educational needs from the NCSE's Regional Service. The Special Education Support Service can, as part of their designated training modules, provide guidance for schools in relation to the management of difficult behaviour.

Further to the receipt of policy advice from the NCSE, the Department of Education es-

established an Expert Working Group to develop guidelines for schools on the prevention and management of challenging behaviours (including the use of physical interventions) where such behaviour is considered as likely to present serious risk of physical harm to the student concerned and/or others within the school environment.

Development of the Guidelines has been informed by evidence showing that whole school positive behavioural approaches and early and ongoing engagement with the school community, including parents/guardians, are necessary for the development of effective school policy and practice.

Following consideration of the views and contributions received as part of the consultation process, a final draft of the guidelines has been prepared and is being considered by the Department. They place a strong focus on prevention and early intervention strategies for the management of crisis student behaviour in which physical intervention may be employed only as the last part of a comprehensive, positive and planned behavioural approach by the school. They are underpinned by the principles that such intervention is never used for the purposes of discipline; that it should be applied proportionately and should last only as long as is necessary to de-escalate the situation. The guidelines underline the importance of continued supervision of children during a crisis period including matters related to behaviour and the need for such incidents to be recorded.

The guidelines when issued will apply to all schools. In this regard, consideration is being given to the implementation of guidelines by schools including the kind of supports and training that may be required.

### **Education Policy**

518. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Education the date her Department will issue guidance for schools on the use of reduced timetables; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13013/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the Deputy will be aware, guidelines in relation to reduced timetables have been drafted.

The Department has consulted with education stakeholders to consider the timing of the introduction of the guidelines on reduced timetables in the context of Covid 19 and the current operating environment for schools. There were concerns about issuing guidelines in the current Covid context where the safe and sustainable reopening of schools remains the overriding priority for all stakeholders.

The introduction of the guidelines will be done in collaboration with Tusla Education Support Service and education partners. It is intended that the guidelines will issue to schools in due course allowing time for schools to plan for their implementation, taking into account the current priority focus on supporting schools in the current re-opening phase.

### **Education Data**

519. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Education the number of section 29 appeals in each of the years 2018 to 2020; the number of these appeals that were for expulsion, suspension or refusal to enrol; the number of the appeals that involved a child with special educational needs; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13014/21]

**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 12th 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 12th November 2020 for the remainder of 2020. This set of figures includes information regarding the number of section 29 appeals which involved a child with special educational needs. This information was not held for appeals prior to 12th November 2020.

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.

YEAR	2018	2019	2020
Permanent Exclusion			
Resolved before hearing	8	9	7
Upheld at hearing	22	23	8
Not upheld at hearing	38	68	21
Refusals to enrol			
Resolved before hearing	165	163	148
Upheld at hearing	90	66	63
Not upheld at hearing	100	119	77
Suspensions			
Resolved before hearing	3	2	4
Upheld at hearing	1	9	2
Not upheld at hearing	5	3	1
Total number of appeals concluded.	432	462	331

Appeals received under updated procedures 2020

	Oversubscription	Reasons other than oversubscription	Suspension	Expulsion	Total
	74	8	3	11	96
NCSE Involvement	6	5	3	4	18

#### DEIS Scheme

520. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Education her plans to grant Delivering

Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DEIS, status to a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13031/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** A detailed analysis of school enrolment data and the latest data available from Census 2016, using the HP Deprivation Index, has been carried out by members of the DEIS Technical Group. This group contains representatives of the Department's Statistics and Social Inclusion Units, the Inspectorate and the Educational Research Centre. My Department commenced a consultation process with education stakeholder representatives on the technical aspects and implementation of the model, and work is ongoing on final elements of the model. It is envisaged that this will then provide the basis for development of a DEIS resource allocation system to match resources to identified need. Until this work is complete, it is not intended to extend the DEIS programme to any further schools.

### State Examinations

521. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Education if a person (details supplied) will be provided with a copy of their leaving certificate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13039/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The State Examinations Commission (SEC) has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

### School Staff

522. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education if public service status has been granted to all grant-paid secretaries; if a review has been carried out in respect of the two-tier system; if agreement has been reached between a union (details supplied) and her Department that is acceptable to both parties on the issue of fair pay for vital school staff; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13041/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I am keenly aware of the vital contribution of secretaries and caretakers within school communities and I recognise the very important work done by these staff, and the other support staff in the running of our schools.

In recognition of their role, I have put special arrangements in place for this school year whereby schools will be funded to employ a replacement secretary or caretaker in the event that staff who are at very high risk of contracting serious illness from COVID-19 cannot work on the school premises. I have also extended the Employee Assistance Service to all school staff including caretakers.

The majority of primary and voluntary secondary schools receive assistance to provide for secretarial, caretaking and cleaning services under grant schemes. Where a school employs a staff member to support those functions those staff are employees of individual schools and responsibility for terms of employment rests with the school.

On foot of a Chairman's Note to the Lansdowne Road Agreement, my Department implemented the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator. The Arbitrator recommended a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate

of €13 be phased in over that period. This arbitration agreement covered the period up to 31 December 2019 and has been fully implemented and increased funding was provided by my Department.

The arbitration agreement was designed to be of greatest benefit to lower-paid secretaries and caretakers. For example, a secretary or caretaker who was paid the then minimum wage of €8.65 per hour in 2015 prior to the arbitration has from 1 January 2019 been paid €13 per hour which is a 50% increase in that individual's hourly pay.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim from the 2015 agreement. Officials from my Department, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and School Management Bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the claim. On 27th of October 2020 under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission, an understanding was agreed on a pathway to progress the issues. Several key strands have been identified, and a phased approach will be taken to the development of proposals. The parties are currently scheduled to return to the WRC this month and I support meaningful engagement on this issue by all parties.

### **Special Educational Needs**

**523. Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the arrangements in place for assessments of needs for young persons who are transitioning from primary school to secondary school in circumstances in which provision has not been made for them to be assessed due to constrained resources and the Covid-19 restrictions where supports do not transfer from primary to secondary such as in a case (details supplied); the way in which she plans to deal with this gap in assessments of needs; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13047/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (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](http://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 ADHD, Dyslexia, or Dispraxia, can therefore receive additional teaching support in schools, without a requirement for them to have a formal assessment of need.

I can also advise that an Education Passport has been devised by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) which includes a suite of materials to support the reporting and transfer of pupil information from primary to post-primary schools.

An Education Passport, for each pupil, should be sent to the relevant post-primary school following confirmation of enrolment and, ideally, by the end of June. Since 2014/15, schools are required to use the NCCA Education Passport materials to support the reporting and transfer of pupil information at the end of sixth class. The materials are presented under the umbrella title of “Education Passport”

The ‘Education Passport’ is a compulsory requirement for all 6th class pupils in their transition from Primary to Post-Primary School.

Details of the Education passport are available at: <https://www.ncca.ie/en/primary/reporting-and-transfer/education-passport>

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

524. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education if the wearing of masks and antigen testing will be brought into primary schools for children and teachers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13065/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** 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 recently confirmed that the wearing of masks by primary school students is not being recommended at this time.

The current position of the HSE is that serial antigen testing is not recommended as a public health measure to keep schools safe. 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**

525. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education if all teachers, particularly those with medical conditions and those who are pregnant, will be issued with standard medical masks in line with those being provided to special needs assistants, SNAs; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13066/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** 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.

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

The HSE has recently published guidance for the education sector in respect of pregnant employees and my Department is currently seeking clarifications from the HSE on this guidance. In the meantime, a pregnant teacher should temporarily continue to work remotely i.e. working from home.

The temporary arrangements for teachers during the partial re-opening period are outlined in my Department's Information Note TC 0005/2021 for primary teachers and Information

Note TC 0007/2021 for post primary teachers. On the full re-opening of primary schools due to take place on 15th March, Information Note TC 0010/2021 for primary teachers SNAs will apply.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

526. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education the consideration she has given to ensuring that pregnant teaching staff are treated in a manner similar to HSE staff, particularly those who are over 35 years of age with a high body mass index, BMI, being considered as very high-risk for Covid-19, in the interest of parity across the employment categories; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13067/21]

**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 other school staff and the minimisation of the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning. The current COVID-19 arrangements in place for teachers are outlined in my Department's Circular Letter 0049/2020.

The HSE has recently published guidance for the education sector in respect of pregnant employees and my Department is currently seeking clarifications from the HSE on this guidance. In the meantime, a pregnant teacher should temporarily continue to work remotely i.e. working from home.

The temporary arrangements for teachers during the partial re-opening period are outlined in my Department's Information Note TC 0005/2021 for primary teachers and Information Note TC 0007/2021 for post primary teachers. On the full re-opening of primary schools due to take place on 15th March, Information Note TC 0010/2021 for primary teachers SNAs will apply.

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

A detailed on-line questionnaire is submitted by the teacher to the OHS, along with detailed medical evidence to provide clarity with respect to the medical complaint(s) in question. All of this information is reviewed by the OHS specialist occupational health physician, including the combined and cumulative risk that can arise when a teacher suffers from more than one health condition. The risk categorisation is comprehensive and follows the same process that is being applied across other sectors. A teacher is categorised into one of three COVID-19 risk categories. These are 'Normal Risk', 'High Risk', and 'Very High Risk'. The outcome of the risk categorisation is governed by the latest HSE guidance. My Department is following the same guidance that is in use across the public sector. The latest HSE guidance on the 'very high risk' group is at: <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/people-at-higher-risk.html>.

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

Based on HSE advice, a teacher categorised by the OHS as 'Very High Risk' must not attend the workplace. However he/she remains available for work and the employer should prioritise alternative working arrangements to the maximum extent possible e.g. working from home.

The employer 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 primary and post primary schools, an employer should temporarily facilitate more flexible working arrangements where a teacher has been categorised by the OHS as 'High Risk'. A teacher who is over 60 years of age should also be temporarily facilitated by these arrangements. This may include re-assignment of a teacher to other duties within the school or facilitated to work remotely i.e. working from home. When schools fully re-open, these flexible working arrangements will no longer be available and therefore a teacher in the 'High Risk' group who is medically fit for work must return to the workplace.

### **Schools Building Projects**

527. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Education further to Parliamentary Question No. 465 of 27 January 2021, her views on whether the Framework of Design and Build Contractors to ensure the tendering and appointment of a contractor for the construction of schools (details supplied) will be in place before the projected timeframe of the end of the first quarter of 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13068/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The building project referred to by the Deputy is being delivered under my Department's Design and Build Programme and planning permission has been secured for the campus project.

My Department is currently in the process of establishing a Framework of Design and Build Contractors to which Design and Build projects can be tendered. The tender process commenced on the 4th December 2019. The second stage of the tender process which involves the detailed tender for several schools is expected to be concluded in Quarter 1 2021. My Department's intention is to have the project referred to by the Deputy tendered as early as possible thereafter.

### **Special Educational Needs Staff**

528. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Education if a special needs assistant (details supplied) who is due to retire will be allowed to extend their working life; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13070/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I wish to inform the Deputy that the upper retirement age for standard accrual members of the Single Pension Scheme is 70 years of age. Therefore any standard accrual member may continue in pensionable employment until 70 years of age. Such members are not obliged to retire at the normal retirement age (66 in this case). The normal retirement age is the earliest age at which a member can choose to retire with full benefits (i.e. not actuarially reduced).

### **School Accommodation**

529. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Education the next steps in regard to a school (details supplied); the measures she plans to undertake in advance of the 2021-2022 school term with consideration to further interim accommodation and other relevant operations

measures; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13135/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** With regard to the school to which the Deputy refers my Department is currently preparing for a planning application to be lodged with the relevant local authority shortly for the further additional interim accommodation required for the school for September 2021.

We will liaise with the school authority and Patron Body as this is progressed.

### Education Policy

530. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education when the New Schools Establishment Group will next report on locations for additional secondary schools in County Wicklow; if her attention has been drawn to the need for additional new secondary schools to be established in the county; the process to identify areas needing new secondary schools; the process by which a local community can apply to her Department to have this need examined; the unit in her Department responsible for this work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13138/21]

**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.

The New Schools Establishment Group (NSEG) is an external independent advisory group which was set up in 2011 to advise the Minister on the patronage of new schools. A patronage process is run after it has been decided, based on demographic analysis, that a new school is required. The patronage process is open to all patron bodies and prospective patrons.

An Online Patronage Process System (OPPS) provides objective information to parents in the relevant school planning areas to assist them in making an informed choice about their preferred model of patronage and language of instruction for the new school. A prospective patron can choose the school(s) it wishes to apply for and complete an application form in that regard for each school, for submission to my Department. The Department provides details on the OPPS of the school(s) and the list of applicant patrons which have applied for patronage of

the school(s). Parents access the OPPS website, which allows them to access the appropriate survey for their area, to input the details of the eligible child(ren) and to select their preferred patron and language of instruction (where applicable). Parental preferences from parents of children who reside in the school planning areas concerned, together with the extent of diversity currently available in these areas, are key to decisions in relation to the outcome of the process.

Following their consideration of my Department's assessment reports, the NSEG submits a report with recommendations to me for consideration and final decision. The assessment reports and the NSEG recommendations for all such patronage processes are made available on my Department's website.

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 and a new post-primary school for the Wicklow area, Wicklow Educate Together Secondary School which opened in 2019. Additionally, following previous analysis, a new post primary school, North Wicklow Educate Together Secondary School, was established in 2016 to serve the Bray, Kilternan and Ballybrack\_Shankill school planning areas.

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 school planning areas across County Wicklow, 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.

### **Site Acquisitions**

531. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education if her Department will commence the process to acquire the site zoned for a new secondary school in Newtownmountkennedy, County Wicklow; if the need for a new secondary school has been identified at this location; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13139/21]

**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. For school planning purposes, Newtownmountkennedy is located in the Kilcoole school planning area.

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.

A site acquisition process is only commenced where an identified requirement for a school building project exists.

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 school planning 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 Kilcoole school planning area, 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.

### **Education Policy**

532. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education if her Department has examined the need to establish a new secondary school in Enniskerry, County Wicklow (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13140/21]

**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. Enniskerry is in the Bray school planning area.

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:

Following such analysis, a new post primary school to serve the Bray, Kiltarnan and Ballybrack-Shankill school planning areas (North Wicklow ETSS) was established in 2016.

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 Bray school planning area, 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 Curriculum**

533. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fact that some secondary schools require first-year students to choose their subjects for second year in the coming weeks despite the fact students have not physically been in school since December, and some students are yet to experience subjects in person given that schools offer certain subjects before and after Christmas; if she plans to address this issue given that the situation makes it much more difficult for students to choose the correct subjects; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13148/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Subject choices are a matter for the individual schools depending on resources available. The programme that each school plans and delivers should be based on my Department's approved specifications, and the teaching hours should be registered on the school timetable.

The Department of Education does not have the authority to dictate to schools regarding what subjects are offered. Schools are generally privately managed institutions which, although largely funded by the State, are relatively autonomous. Any issue with the subject choice being offered would have to be addressed to the principal of the school in question, and/or the Board of Management.

### **DEIS Scheme**

534. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Education if she will consider a reduction of one in all class levels in Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DEIS, band one schools and not just for senior classes, given that they have not received a reduction in several years unlike mainstream primary schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13183/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** On 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 School Completion 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 De-

partment will spend over €150 million on the programme this year.

### **School Staff**

535. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Education when the role of school secretaries will be upgraded to clerical officer status; and if there is a timescale for this transition. [13187/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I am keenly aware of the vital contribution of secretaries and caretakers within school communities and I recognise the very important work done by these staff, and the other support staff in the running of our schools.

In recognition of their role, I have put special arrangements in place for this school year whereby schools will be funded to employ a replacement secretary or caretaker in the event that staff who are at very high risk of contracting serious illness from COVID-19 cannot work on the school premises. I have also extended the Employee Assistance Service to all school staff including caretakers.

The majority of primary and voluntary secondary schools receive assistance to provide for secretarial, caretaking and cleaning services under grant schemes. Where a school employs a staff member to support those functions those staff are employees of individual schools and responsibility for terms of employment rests with the school.

On foot of a Chairman's Note to the Lansdowne Road Agreement, my Department implemented the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator. The Arbitrator recommended a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period. This arbitration agreement covered the period up to 31 December 2019 and has been fully implemented and increased funding was provided by my Department.

The arbitration agreement was designed to be of greatest benefit to lower-paid secretaries and caretakers. For example, a secretary or caretaker who was paid the then minimum wage of €8.65 per hour in 2015 prior to the arbitration has from 1 January 2019 been paid €13 per hour which is a 50% increase in that individual's hourly pay.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim from the 2015 agreement. Officials from my Department, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and School Management Bodies have been engaging with Fórsa on the claim. On 27th of October 2020 under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission, an understanding was agreed on a pathway to progress the issues. Several key strands have been identified, and a phased approach will be taken to the development of proposals. The parties are currently scheduled to return to the WRC this month and I support meaningful engagement on this issue by all parties.

### **Siollabas Gaeilge**

536. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den an Aire Oideachais an bhfuil i gceist aici siollabais nua Ghaeilge a thabhairt isteach don Ardeist nó an bhfuil i gceist aici ábhair éagsúla a dhéanamh de theanga na Gaeilge agus de litríocht na Gaeilge; má tá athruithe i gceist, céard atá á mholadh agus an mbeidh deis ag scoláirí clárú le dhá shiollabas nó dhá ábhar Gaeilge a leanúint ag an am céanna agus grádanna dá réir a fháil san Ardeist; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [13219/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** D'fhoilsigh an Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta dréachtsonraíochtaí do T1 Gaeilge (an Ghaeilge mar an chéad teanga) agus do T2 Gaeilge (an Ghaeilge mar an dara teanga) na hArdteistiméireachta le déanaí le haghaidh comhairliúcháin phoiblí. Tá siad ar fáil ag an nasc seo a leanas: <https://ncca.ie/en/senior-cycle/curriculum-developments/gaeilge/>.

Beidh an comhairliúchán oscailte go dtí an 31ú Lúnasa 2021 agus déanfar athbhreithniú ar na sonraíochtaí i bhfianaise aon tuairimí a fhaightear.

Tá an fhorbairt seo maidir le sonraíochtaí T1 ar leith agus T2 ar leith ag tógáil ar na cinn atá curtha ar fáil cheana féin sa tSraith Shóisearach agus tá straitéisí agus polasaithe an Rialtais lena n-áirítear An Straitéis 20 Bliain don Ghaeilge agus An Polasaí don Oideachas Gaeltachta mar bhonn agus mar thaca leo.

Tá sonraíocht T1 Gaeilge na hArdteistiméireachta dírithe ar chainteoirí dúchais agus foghlaimoírí i scoileanna Gaeltachta, agus ar scoláirí san earnáil a fheidhmíonn trí mheán na Gaeilge (Gaelcholáistí agus Aonaid lán-Ghaeilge). Tá sé beartaithe go mbeidh sé de rogha ag scoileanna a fheidhmíonn trí mheán an Bhéarla sonraíocht T1 a sholáthar freisin.

Tá sonraíocht T2 Gaeilge na hArdteistiméireachta ag díriú ar scoláirí a bhaineann úsáid as an nGaeilge mar an dara teanga, go príomha i scoileanna a fheidhmíonn trí mheán an Bhéarla.

Is cuid dhílis an staidéar ar théacsanna liteartha agus neamhliteartha de na cineálacha eis-péiris foghlama a chuirtear ar fáil do scoláirí sa dá dhréachtshonraíocht don Ardteistiméireacht atá foilsithe anois le haghaidh comhairliúcháin.

Ní dhéanfadh scoláirí ach ceann amháin de na sonraíochtaí do scrúdú na hArdteistiméireachta in aon bhliain amháin.

## **School Transport**

537. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education the status of school transport for a person (details supplied). [13241/21]

**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.

Bus Éireann which operates the School Transport Scheme on behalf of the Department has advised that the child to whom the Deputy refers is eligible for school transport. A service operates to the school of attendance with a pick up point of 6.3 km from where the child resides.

For a service to be established closer to where the child resides at least 10 eligible pupils from a distinct location would have to be availing of the service.

As this child resides more than 3.2 km from home to the pick-up point, and is eligible for school transport the child will be entitled to the Remote Area Grant from where the child resides to the pick-up point.

School Transport Section of the Department of Education will contact the family in due course to advise of eligibility for the remote area grant to the pick-up point and the process involved in claiming this grant. As it is based on school attendance the grant can only be paid at the end of the school year.

### **Schools Building Projects**

538. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education the number of representations she received from parents on a school building project (details supplied). [13305/21]

539. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education the status of a school building project (details supplied). [13306/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 538 and 539 together.

The building project referred to by the Deputy is being delivered under my Department's Design and Build Programme and planning permission has been secured for the campus project. The information in relation to the number of representations received in relation to the project is not readily available in the format requested by the Deputy.

The decision to grant planning permission by the Local Authority was subject to 57 conditions primarily related to the specification and construction of a significant road network which is essential to access the school site and which will be built by a third party developer.

My Department, through its Project Managers and their Design Team, continues to work closely with the developer and the Local Authority in relation to the necessary planning compliance documentation for both the schools and the roads. Following agreement with the local authority on compliance matters, it is the developer's intention to commence the roads construction by end of Quarter 1 2021.

My Department is currently in the process of establishing a Framework of Design and Build Contractors to which Design and Build projects, including the project referred to by the Deputy, can be tendered. That Framework is expected to be in place by the end of Quarter 1 2021. My Department's intention is to have the project referred to by the Deputy tendered as early as possible thereafter.

### **Schools Building Projects**

540. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education the status of a school building project (details supplied). [13307/21]

**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 commenced on the 4th December 2019. The second stage of the tender process which involves the detailed tender for several schools is expected to be concluded in Quarter 1 2021. It is anticipated that the project for the school referred to by the Deputy will proceed to tender thereafter.

## Covid-19 Pandemic

541. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if she will give a clear direction that parents dropping and collecting children from school grounds should wear masks while doing so; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13331/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Government has always been guided by public health advice in relation to the safe operation of 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.

In this context it is very important that the whole school community following public health advice and schools have been asked to remind parents and pupils not to congregate in school grounds/at school gates when dropping and collecting children. Public Health have advised that adherence to the infection control measures in place will keep schools safe for children and staff.

The Department is very appreciative of the ongoing efforts of the school community working to limit the risk of the spread of COVID-19 in schools and ensuring that the infection control measures put in place in line with the school COVID-19 response plans are effective in making schools safe for children and staff.

## Schools Building Projects

542. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education the number of times she has met officials in her Department to discuss a school building project (details supplied). [13335/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I meet and engage with my officials from the Planning and Building Unit on a regular basis to discuss capital projects, which would include the project for Carrigtwohill Community College. I am acutely aware of the importance of this project and the need to progress it as quickly as possible.

## Schools Building Projects

543. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education the number of times she has met officials in her Department to discuss a school building project (details supplied). [13336/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I meet and engage with officials from the Planning and Building Unit on a regular basis to discuss capital projects, which would include the project for the Patrician Academy. I am acutely aware of the importance of this project and the need to progress it as quickly as possible.

## State Examinations

544. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education if she will provide details of the roadmap for students doing practical exams in, for example, music, home economics, orals, aurals, woodwork, metalwork and so on, given some are commencing in three weeks' time and

students have not been informed of plans on same; and if the matter will be addressed without further delay. [13353/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The State Examinations Commission (SEC) has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations. In view of this I have forwarded the Deputy's query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to him.

### **Special Educational Needs**

545. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the process for the implementation of section 37A of the Education Act 1998 as inserted by section 8 of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018; the factors that are taken into account in the decision-making process; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13373/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education appropriate to their needs is a priority for this Government. The State 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.

This legal power to compel schools to open new special classes is only used where the following criteria apply:

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 has been used for a 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.

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.

### **State Examinations**

546. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Education when clarity will be given to leaving certificate students applied for personal reflection tasks, graphics and construction work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13385/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The State Examinations Commission (SEC) has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations. In view of this I have forwarded the Deputy's query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to him.

### **School Staff**

547. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Education her plans to modernise a circular (details supplied); the position on the employment status of physical education teachers; the number of physical education teachers on the payroll of her Department; and the reason for excluding them from incremental credit. [13391/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department does not hold records in relation to the subject information that a teacher has qualified in.

Regarding incremental credit the criteria for the award of incremental credit to recognised teachers was agreed under the auspices of the Teachers Conciliation Council (TCC). This Council is comprised of representatives of teachers, school management, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the Department of Education and is chaired by an official of the Workplace Relations Commission.

The criteria for the award of incremental credit is laid out in my Department's Circulars 29/2007 and 29/2010 for Post-Primary teachers. For the purposes of your query the relevant Circular is 29/2007.

My Department is making inquiries in relation to the application for incremental credit that has been raised and will reply to the Deputy in writing once we have finalised these inquiries.

### **School Staff**

548. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education if she will create a scheme in order that primary school teachers on an agreed temporary exchange with another school can make the exchange on a permanent basis subject to the agreement of all parties; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13393/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** In February 2018 my Department in-

troduced the “*Temporary Re-Assignment Scheme For Primary Teachers*”. This Scheme was agreed under the auspices of the Teachers Conciliation Council (TCC). The Council is comprised of representatives of teachers, school management, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the Department of Education and is chaired by an official of the Workplace Relations Commission.

The purpose of the Temporary Re-Assignment Scheme is to facilitate an arrangement between two eligible teachers who, with the approval of their respective employers, wish to apply for temporary re-assignment to a different school for educational purposes. The provisions of the Scheme are set out in Chapter 9 of Circular 0054/2019.

Paragraph 1.3 of the Circular states:

In accordance with the terms of the scheme, the minimum period for which a re-assignment may be facilitated is one school year and the maximum is three school years. Applications for Temporary Re-Assignment are approved by the Board of Management of each school, and details thereof are notified to my Department. On conclusion of the temporary Re-Assignment period the teacher must return to his/her original school and no further Temporary Re-Assignment can be entered into in the course of their career.

The core function of the panel arrangements is to facilitate the redeployment of all surplus permanent/CID holding teachers, to other schools that have vacancies. Primary schools are required to fill permanent vacancies from teachers on the Main Redeployment Panel in the first instance and thereafter from Supplementary Redeployment Panels comprised of eligible fixed-term (temporary/substitute) and part-time teachers. Primary teachers are placed on redeployment panels in line with the patronage of the school from which they are redeployed and are available to schools with teaching vacancies that are within a 45km distance of the teacher’s base school.

### **School Transport**

549. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education if a seat on a school bus will be provided for a child (details supplied). [13416/21]

**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 Post-Primary School Transport Scheme, children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 4.8kms from and are attending their nearest Post-Primary School/Education Centre as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

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. Concessionary transport is subject to a number of terms and conditions includ-

ing the availability of spare seats on an existing service and payment of the annual charge. The availability of concessionary transport may vary from year to year and cannot be guaranteed for the duration of a child's education cycle. Where the number of applications for transport on a concessionary basis exceeds the number of seats available, Bus Éireann will determine the allocation of the tickets.

Bus Éireann has advised that the pupil referred to by the Deputy is not eligible for school transport as they are not attending their nearest post-primary school. A refund of the school transport charge was processed on 10th September 2020.

### **Insurance Coverage**

550. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Education further to Parliamentary Question No. 446 of 24 February, if her attention has been drawn to the fact that the lack of insurance cover for teachers and special needs assistants, SNAs, working under this programme will further disadvantage children with special needs from Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools, DEIS, schools whose parents may not be in a position to pay for private insurance; if she will address this issue, as a matter of urgency; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13447/21]

**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 and weekends.

### **Schools Building Projects**

551. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education further to Parliamentary Question No. 395 of 3 February, if there has been further progress in advancing a much needed building project at a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13449/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm to the Deputy, that officials from my Department's Planning and Building Unit are continuing to work with the management authority of the school in question to progress the proposed building project to meet the long-term accommodation needs of the school.

## Autism Support Services

552. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education the additional technology that may be available to school students who are on the autistic spectrum; and if these students can avail of financial support towards the purchase of a tablet or laptop. [13494/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** My Department provides for a range of supports for schools which have enrolled pupils with special educational needs, including autistic pupils, in order to ensure that wherever a child is enrolled, they will have access to an appropriate education.

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.

My Department also provides funding to schools towards the cost of assistive technology for pupils in Primary, Post Primary and Special schools, for equipment and specialist software for educational purposes under the Assistive Technology scheme, as set out in my Department's Circular 0010/2013.

In order to qualify for equipment under the Assistive Technology scheme, a child must have been diagnosed with a physical or communicative disability and must also have a recommendation in a professional assessment that the equipment is essential in order to allow the child to access the curriculum. It must also be clear that the existing I.T. equipment in the school is insufficient to meet the child's needs.

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 for assistive technology.

Special Needs Organisers (SENOs) make recommendations to my Department where assistive technology is required. The NCSE operates within my Department's criteria in making recommendations for support, as set out in my Department's Circular 0010/2013.

It is open to schools to appeal this decision. The appeals process is outlined on my Department's website at the following link: <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/Grants-and-Additional-Support/Assistive-Technology-Grant/>.

All schools have the names and contact details of their local SENO. Parents may also contact their local SENO directly to discuss their child's special educational needs, using the contact details available on [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

*Questions - Written Answers*  
**Schools Building Projects**

553. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Education the status of a building project for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13512/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The project to which the Deputy refers has been devolved for delivery to Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board (WWETB).

The ETB is currently in the process of procuring a Design Team for this project. Thereafter, it will ensure that the project progresses to design stage, obtains the necessary statutory planning permission, and moves the project onward to tender and construction in due course.

As the project is at an early stage in the delivery process, it is not possible at this time to give a date for its completion.

Please be assured that the ETB will be engaging directly with the school authority to keep it informed of progress.

**Schools Building Projects**

554. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Education the status of progress on a building project for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13513/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The project to which the Deputy refers has been devolved for delivery to Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board (WWETB).

I can confirm that a Design Team to deliver this project has been appointed by the ETB. The Design Team will now begin preparing the Stage 1 report (preliminary design).

While at this early stage it is not possible to provide a timeline for completion of the project, WWETB will be engaging directly with the school authority to keep it informed of progress.

**Special Educational Needs**

555. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if the July provision will be extended by two weeks for 2021 given the disruption to students caused by school buildings being closed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13540/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (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 –

My Department is progressing work on proposals for this years Summer Provision scheme which will be influenced by the current public health emergency. These proposals will be developed based on engagement and consultation with the education partners. Any changes to the scheme will be considered as part of this work.

## Early Start Programme

556. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the number of Early Start units in schools currently under review with her Department; the reason for the review; if these units are at risk of being closed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13541/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Early Start programme was established in 1994, and is a one-year intervention in a number of primary schools in designated areas of urban disadvantage to meet the needs of children aged between 3 years and 5 years who are at risk of not reaching their potential within the school system. Since the establishment of Early Start, early childhood education and care provision in Ireland has changed significantly. The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme was introduced in 2010, and was extended to two years' provision in 2018. The ECCE scheme is under the remit of my colleague the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

While the ECCE scheme is the national universal two-year pre-school programme available to all children, the Early Start programme continues to run in 40 schools, and in the 2020/21 school year there are 905 children enrolled. Provision of Early Start is monitored across all 40 schools on an ongoing basis, having regard to the cost of provision and numbers enrolled, and Early Start units may also be reviewed in individual schools. There are currently no individual Early Start units in which reviews are taking place.

## Education Schemes

557. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the status of the free school books scheme which was piloted in September 2020; when a review of the pilot scheme can be expected; and if she is committed to extending the scheme in the future. [13542/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department provides a book grant to all recognised primary and post primary schools within the Free Education Scheme in order to provide assistance for books including Book Rental Schemes. Under this scheme, the Department provided funding of €17.1 million in 2020 to all of these schools.

School book rental schemes have an important role to play in reducing the cost of school books for parents and in order to support the establishment of book rental schemes my Department provided €15.7 million seed capital in 2014, 2015 and 2016 to primary schools. Circa. 96% of primary schools and 68% of post-primary schools operate a book rental scheme.

It is a matter for the Board of Management of each individual school to decide on its own policy in relation to the use of book grant funding in the school but they are expected to adopt a cost-conscious approach to the selection of books for use in their classes. The current arrangement relies on the local knowledge of the school in order to ensure a fair allocation of funds to those most in need.

Additional funding of €1million provided under Budget 2020 was allocated to 102 Primary DEIS schools for a new pilot programme for the 2020/21 school year. The aim of this pilot is to provide free school books for students in the schools involved, and to support these schools in eliminating the cost of school books for parents. It will run for the period of one year and its effectiveness and impact will be monitored and evaluated before any decision is made as regards its possible extension or continuation. Under Circular 46/2013, DEIS schools receive a book grant of €21 per student. This pilot provided an additional €64 per student to increase the overall book grant rate to €85 per student enrolled in the school. This additional funding issued

to schools in May 2020.

### **Education Policy**

558. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the number of schools the pilot workshops plan to recruit further to her statement of 3 March 2021 in order to pilot workshops on well-being and resilience including trauma in order to inform approaches for school leaders in primary and post-primary schools; the way in which schools will be selected; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13544/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) service of my Department is developing a range of workshops on the promotion of wellbeing and resilience in schools which includes trauma informed approaches. The approaches outlined in the workshops are based on research findings, on the experience of experts in their fields and on the experience of practicing psychologists working in schools. The workshops will be available to build the capability of school staff in both primary and post-primary settings, including for school leaders, teachers and SNAs. Work is underway to identify schools for inclusion in a pilot of the workshops while being cognisant of prioritising teacher contact time in schools. In selecting schools, a mix of DEIS, non DEIS and urban and rural schools will be included.

Following the pilot a national roll-out is planned during the next academic year.

### **School Transport**

559. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education if school transport will be provided to two siblings (details supplied) in County Mayo in view of the fact that this family applied and paid on time for school transport. [13551/21]

**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.

Bus Éireann has confirmed that the children to whom the Deputy refers are eligible for School Transport. Payment details for this family were submitted on 7th September 2020 and as such were submitted late. Late applicants and/or families who pay late are not guaranteed a seat and will only be allocated a seat if capacity is available once seats are allocated to those families who applied and paid on time for transport services for the 2020/2021 school year. In addition, payments or submission of medical card details for Post-Primary seats completed or made after 4th August 2020 will be only considered when 50% capacity, required by Covid19 public health guidelines, is achieved on each route.

However, Bus Éireann has confirmed that due to additional capacity created arising from social distancing being implemented on a school transport service, tickets will issue to the family to whom the Deputy refers. Bus Éireann will be in contact with the family in this regard.

## Departmental Advertising

560. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Education the amount spent across her Department on advertising in relation to Covid-19 by month and by media outlet (details supplied) from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021. [13556/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Department's spending on advertising in relation to Covid-19 for the period 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021 is outlined in the attached spreadsheet.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-10\_pq560-10-03-2021\_en.xlsx">Covid 19 Advertising</a>]

## Food Poverty

561. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she has read the research paper by a union (details supplied) which explores inequality and deprivation in Ireland. [13523/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** I can confirm to the Deputy that I have read the report in full.

The report in question, '*Hungry bellies are not equal to full bellies: exploring inequality and deprivation in Ireland*', published by Unite Ireland, considers recent commentary on income inequality, as well as exploring the difference between income inequality and economic inequality. It notes recent research on the topic, and reflects the experience of a number of voluntary groups working with people experiencing poverty and deprivation. This is an interesting report in the context of the work my Department is undertaking to address social inclusion under the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025.

This Roadmap for Social Inclusion which was published in January 2020, is the Government's strategy to address poverty and social inclusion in Ireland. It sets out the Government's ambition to reduce consistent poverty to 2% or less by 2025 and to make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive states in the EU. The aim of the Roadmap is to achieve this ambitious target by delivering 66 commitments across Government Departments. In the context of the 'Hungry bellies' report, it is important to note that the Roadmap looks beyond income as the only measure of addressing exclusion or inequality. The Programme for Government includes a commitment for the implementation of the Roadmap. As Minister of State with responsibility for social inclusion, I am the Chair of the Social Inclusion Roadmap Steering Group, which oversees the implementation of the Roadmap across Government and monitors its progress. This group met for the first time in November 2020 and is due to meet again on 30th March.

The Roadmap contains a range of targets based on data collected as part of the annual Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC), the official source of data on household and equivalised disposable income in Ireland, undertaken by the CSO. It provides a number of key national poverty indicators, including the 'at risk of poverty rate', the 'consistent poverty rate' and the 'enforced deprivation rate'. The '*Hungry Bellies*' report refers to the most recent Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) data from 2019 which was published in late 2020. This data reflects income and living conditions in Ireland in 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic. The SILC data for 2020, which will reflect the impact of Covid-19, is unlikely to be available until Q4 2021.

The 2019 SILC data showed that basic deprivation (which measures the percentage of the population experiencing enforced deprivation) had increased from 15.1% in 2018 to 17.8% in 2019. However the At-Risk-of-Poverty rate, which measures the percentage of the population experiencing relative income poverty, had fallen from 14.0% to 12.8% in the same period. The consistent poverty rate, which measures the percentage of the population who are both at risk of poverty and experiencing deprivation, decreased slightly to 5.5% in 2019, from the 2018 rate of 5.6%. Information on the Survey on Income and Living Conditions is available at:

<https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/socialconditions/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc/>

It is reasonable to expect that the 2020 SILC data will reflect the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions on household incomes. However this impact is likely to be lessened to some degree by the introduction by Government of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the Employee Wage Subsidy Scheme. Research by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), as part of their Budget Perspectives series in 2020, highlighted the importance of the social protection system for supporting those on low-incomes in general and the role of pandemic supports in ‘cushioning’ the impact of the unemployment shock related to the pandemic, with the drop in income resulting from pandemic-related unemployment softened by the pandemic income supports.

In addition, Budget 2021 included a range of targeted social welfare measures to assist low income families and households, including an increase in the weekly fuel allowance rate; increases to the qualified child rates for children under and over 12 years of age; an increase in the living alone allowance as well as increases to the weekly income threshold for the Working Family Payment and to the income disregard for the Disability Allowance. These measures will contribute to the ongoing support to low income households provided by the social protection system.

I thank the Deputy for her question and hope this clarifies the matter.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment**

562. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if flexibility can be afforded to freelance and short-term workers with regard to eligibility for the pandemic unemployment payment in recognition of the disruptive financial impact of Covid-19 on employees on short-term annual contracts who are often not covered by the payment eligibility criteria; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12551/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is available to employees and self-employed persons who have lost employment as a direct consequence of COVID-19. To date expenditure on the PUP scheme is over €6.2 billion.

There is some flexibility under PUP which provides that a self-employed person can take up limited employment and retain PUP, whereby they can earn up to €960 over a previous 8 week period. Where a self-employed person exceeds this threshold, they may apply for the Part-Time Job Incentive for the self-employed scheme which enables a person who has been in receipt of the PUP to engage in self-employment for up to 24 hours per week and receive a personal weekly rate of payment of €128.60.

Where a person does not qualify for PUP and is unemployed for 4 days in 7 consecutive days, they may be eligible for a jobseeker payment.

If the Deputy has a specific case, she should forward the details to the Department to determine the appropriate support that may be available to them.

I trust that this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Gender Recognition**

563. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Social Protection if consideration will be given to revising the current procedure in which transgender persons who wish to have their names changed and recognised in organisations, for example, the National Driver Licence Service, are required to enrol their deed poll to do so, thus allowing for this information to become accessible to the public and subsequently disclosing their gender identity and also potentially putting the transgender person at risk of harassment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12558/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The report of the group established to review the 2015 Gender Recognition Act advised that the process of changing a person's name after they receive a gender recognition certificate should be made less difficult and suggested that a gender recognition certificate could act as a legal change of name as well as a legal change of gender. The previous Government had developed legislative proposals to address this issue and these have been carried forward to the new Programme for Government.

Work commenced in relation to advancing the legislative process for these measures at the start of 2020 but due to the dissolution of the last Dáil, the election and subsequent government-formation process, the completion of the transfer of functions process, as well as the focus on responding to the public health crisis, this work was paused.

Since then, the ongoing devotion of resources within the Department to the public health crisis and associated matters has meant that it has not yet been possible to further progress this work. However, the matter will be kept under review and the measures remain as part of the Programme for Government. In the meantime, the Department is examining the possibility of administratively removing the requirement for a Deed Poll to have been completed to receive a Public Services Card where a gender recognition certificate has already been issued.

### **Local Employment Service**

564. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the position regarding the tendering process for the local employment services scheme; the stage the process is at; the timeline on the roll-out of this model; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12565/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As the Deputy will be aware, contracts for the existing employment services have been renewed until end-2021.

My Department is currently finalising a new model of employment services in some areas of the State where there are currently no local employment services. The provision of these new employment services will assist in ensuring that we are in a position to support those who have lost their employment arising from the economic impacts of Covid-19.

This is to be followed by the roll-out of new models of employment services across the State, to be in place for January 2022 when current contracts for existing employment services expire.

These new models of employment services will be in line with EU procurement guidelines and current legal advice and will be procured through open competitive procurement processes.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Disability Allowance**

565. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if flexibility is allowed regarding scholarships awarded to students in receipt of the disability allowance as in the case of a person (detail supplied); the details of the supports available to students with disabilities to ensure their receipt of social protection payments is not penalised as a result of being awarded funding for research and study-related costs; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12567/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I thank the Deputy for raising this matter.

I spoke directly to the person referred to last week as soon as her case was brought to my attention.

I have asked my officials to bring forward the necessary legislative changes required to remedy this situation as a matter of urgency and, once drafted, I intend to sign regulations to this effect in the coming days.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

566. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of a carer's allowance appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12639/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Carer's allowance (CA) is a means-tested social assistance payment made to a person who is habitually resident in the State and who is providing full-time care and attention to a child or an adult who has such a disability that as a result they require that level of care.

I confirm that my Department received an application for CA from the person concerned on 24 October 2019.

On foot of a social welfare inspectors (SWI) report the Deciding Officer (DO) decided that although the person concerned was providing a certain amount of care, the level involved did not amount to full-time care and the application was disallowed.

The person concerned was notified on 31 January 2020 of this decision, the reason for it and of his right of review and appeal.

The person concerned appealed this decision to the Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO). A submission in support of the decision was forwarded to the SWAO on 13 March 2020.

My Department was notified on 26 February 2021 that the appeal had been partially allowed. Consequently, CA was awarded to the person concerned on 01 March 2021 with effect from 20 February 2020. The first payment issued to his nominated bank account on 04 March 2021.

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Arrears for the period 20 February 2020 to 03 March 2021 issued to the person concerned on 04 March 2020.

The person concerned was notified of the outcome on 01 March 2021.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

567. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of a disability allowance appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12640/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered with that office on 29 January 2021. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant Departmental papers and comments by the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought. These papers were received on 15 February 2021.

The appeal was referred on 26 February 2021 to an Appeals Officer who will make a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented or, if required, hold an oral hearing. Hearings are currently being conducted online or by telephone. Due to the current level of Covid-19 restrictions in-person oral appeal hearings have been suspended.

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

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

568. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of a disability allowance appeal for a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12641/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered with that office on 9 February 2021. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant Departmental papers and comments by the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought. The papers were received on 22 February 2021.

The appeal was referred on 1 March 2021 to an Appeals Officer who will make a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented or, if required, hold an oral hearing. Hearings are currently being conducted online or by telephone. Due to the current level of Covid-19 restrictions in-person oral appeal hearings have been suspended.

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

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## **Social Welfare Appeals**

569. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the withdrawal of a disability allowance from a person (details supplied) will be examined; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12642/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered in that office on 20 October 2020. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant papers and comments by or on behalf of the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought from the Department of Social Protection. Those papers were received in the Social Welfare Appeals Office on 25 November 2020 and the case was assigned to an Appeals Officer on 3 December 2020.

The Appeals Officer made a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented and the appeal was disallowed by decision dated 25 January 2021.

I am informed that the person concerned contacted the Social Welfare Appeals Office on 11 February 2021 requesting a review of the appeal decision under section 317 of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 and subsequently provided new medical evidence on 17 February 2021. The file was requested back from the Department and returned to the Appeals Officer for review on 23 February 2021. The person concerned will be advised of the result of this review in the near future.

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

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## **Disability Allowance**

570. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of a disability allowance application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12643/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I confirm that an application from the person concerned for disability allowance (DA) was received by the Department on 19 November 2020.

The application has been referred to a Social Welfare Inspector (SWI) for a report on the person's means and circumstances. On 2 February 2021 the person concerned was asked to supply further documentation which was required by the SWI in order to complete her assessment. To date this further documentation has not been received.

Once the SWI has submitted his/her report to DA section, a decision will be made on the application and the person concerned will be notified directly of the outcome.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## **Social Welfare Appeals**

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571. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of a disability allowance appeal for a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12644/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered with that office on 11 December 2020. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant Departmental papers and comments by the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought. The papers were received on 20 January 2021.

The appeal was referred on 28 January 2021 to an Appeals Officer who will make a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented or, if required, hold an oral hearing. Hearings are currently being conducted online or by telephone. Due to the current level of Covid-19 restrictions in-person oral appeal hearings have been suspended.

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

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Disability Allowance**

572. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a decision will be made on a disability allowance for a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12645/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person concerned has been awarded disability allowance (DA) with effect from 18 November 2020. A letter issued to him on 10 February 2021 informing him of this decision.

The first payment was made by his chosen payment method on 17 February 2021. Arrears of payment due were calculated and issued to the person concerned on 10 February 2021

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

573. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Social Protection the supports available for those forced to take time off work due to illness; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12667/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Department provides a suite of income supports for those who are unable to work due to an illness or disability. It is important to note that entitlement to these supports is not contingent on the nature of the illness/disability but on the extent to which a particular illness or disability impairs or restricts a person's capacity to work. The only exception to this is the enhanced illness benefit payment in respect of Covid-19.

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.

A person who is not eligible for Illness Benefit or whose Illness Benefit expires and who is unable to work may be eligible for other payments depending on their circumstances:

- 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.)

The rate of Illness Benefit payment is based on a person's weekly earnings in the governing contribution year. There are four rates of payment up to a maximum of €203. Increases can be paid in respect of a qualified adult or qualified children.

In addition to the payments listed above, a temporary enhanced Illness Benefit payment was introduced in March 2020 in respect of Covid-19. Its purpose is to encourage people to not go to work due to financial constraint when they should be in isolation. The rate of the enhanced Illness Benefit payment for Covid-19 is €350 per week, with additional payments possible in respect of a qualified adult and qualified children. The payment is made for a defined maximum period for each of the two situations listed. The measures were designed to ensure that, where a registered medical practitioner or a HSE medical officer of health diagnoses a person with COVID-19 or identifies him or her as a probable source of infection of COVID-19, the person concerned can comply with medical advice to isolate.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment**

574. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Social Protection if self-employment earnings for 2020 will be taken into account when assessing the rate of Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment entitlement; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12668/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The rate of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment for a self-employed person is calculated by reference to their reckonable income in either 2018 or 2019, whichever is the greater. Detail of reckonable income is provided to the Department by the Revenue Commissioners.

The Department uses 2019 and 2020 (to end September) earnings data in respect of employees as this information is readily available from the Revenue Commissioners. In contrast, 2018 and 2019 are the last two years for which complete information is available in respect of the reckonable income of self-employed persons. There are no plans to change these reference

periods at this time.

I hope that this clarifies the position for the Deputy at this time.

### Social Welfare Rates

575. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated cost of increasing the telephone support allowance by €1, €2.50, €4 and €5, respectively, in tabular form. [12723/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Telephone Support Allowance (TSA) is a weekly payment of €2.50. Approximately 135,500 customers are in receipt of the TSA payment. The full year cost of the scheme is estimated at €18 million.

The primary objective of the TSA is to allow the most vulnerable people at risk of isolation, including the elderly and those with disabilities, access to personal alarms or phones for security. Therefore, the criteria for the allowance were framed in order to direct the limited resources available to my Department in as targeted a manner as possible.

To receive the allowance a customer of my Department must be in receipt of a qualifying payment and also in receipt of both the Living Alone Allowance and the Fuel Allowance.

Based on a projected average of 136,000 recipients of TSA in 2021, the estimated cost of increasing the weekly rate of TSA by €1, €2.50, €4 or €5 per week would be as follows:-

Proposed Weekly Increase	Resulting Weekly Rate	Annual Budget Required
€1	€3.50	€24.752M
€2.50	€5	€35.36M
€4	€6.50	€45.968M
€5	€7.50	€53.04M

Any decision to increase the weekly rate of TSA would have budget implications and would have to be considered in the context of overall budgetary negotiations.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### Jobseeker's Payments

576. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated full-year cost of increasing the earnings disregard for the jobseeker's transitional payment by €5, €10 and €15, respectively, in tabular form. [12724/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The estimated full year cost of increasing the earnings disregard for the Jobseeker's Transitional Payment by €5, €10, €15, respectively is set out in tabular form below:

-	€
Estimated additional Annual Cost @ €170 disregard	€664,000
Estimated additional Annual Cost @ €175 disregard	€1.33 million
Estimated additional Annual Cost @ €180 disregard	€2 million

The above costings are based on the number of recipients who were working and earning in

excess of €165 per week on the Jobseeker's Transitional Payment as of January 2021.

The costings do not take into account potential behavioural changes, or the inflow of new entrants, which may arise from the introduction of higher income disregards. There would be additional costs on foot of these two factors, which are not possible to calculate and have not been factored into the above costings.

### Jobseeker's Payments

577. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons receiving a jobseeker's allowance; the number of persons in receipt of jobseeker's for more than 390 days; the number of persons currently receiving the fuel allowance who qualified due to being in receipt of jobseeker's allowance; and the number of persons receiving a working family payment. [12758/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The data requested by the Deputy is set out in the table below

Figures as at 28/02/2021	Number of Recipients
Jobseekers Allowance	140,368
Jobseekers Allowance (Claim duration > 390 days)	90,480
Jobseekers Allowance + Fuel Allowance	31,394
Working Family Payment	46,688

### Back to Work Enterprise Allowance Scheme

578. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider extending the back-to-work enterprise schemes for an additional 12 months, given the impact restrictions have had on participants. [12761/21]

581. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Social Protection if an extension will be allowed to the back to work scheme due to Covid-19 (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12854/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 578 and 581 together.

The Back to Work Enterprise Allowance (BTWEA) scheme offers support for people who are long-term unemployed and who are interested in self-employment as a route to entering the labour market. The scheme plays a vital role in supporting the development of new enterprises for the long-term unemployed and is payable for a 24 month period from the commencement of their new business.

All participants of the BTWEA will receive their full period of entitlement of 24 months and, therefore, will not lose out on the support. This includes anyone who contacted the Department to suspend their allowance while their business closed during Covid related restrictions. Where someone suspended their BTWEA, they can avail of the remainder of their 24 months on reopening their business. There are no plans to provide for an extension of this period.

Individuals whose BTWEA entitlement is expiring in August may be entitled to support under the Jobseekers schemes depending on their circumstances at that time.

Details on all the supports available for self-employed individuals is available on [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie)

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputies.

### **Domiciliary Care Allowance**

579. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Social Protection the steps that have been taken to revise the age thresholds for the domiciliary care allowance (details supplied). [12782/21]

**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 currently being finalised and will then 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

While this process is ongoing there has been no change in the conditionality or the age threshold applying to the domiciliary care allowance (DCA) scheme. The DCA scheme remains payable to age 16, where the child fulfils the eligibility conditions.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## **Social Welfare Payments Administration**

580. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her Department utilises a bank (details supplied) for making social welfare payments to recipients; her views on whether making payments through a bank which has no physical branches could have an impact on recipients; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12794/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department, like every other Government Department and Office, is required to move its banking operations to Danske Bank on foot of a Government decision to tender for an “All of Government” Banking Service in 2017.

The Government’s objective then was to identify the most economically advantageous arrangement for the provision of an efficient, streamlined, cost-effective banking structure for all Government Departments and Offices. The solution also had to provide the maximum degree of integration with the new Financial Management Shared Service project. Following a tender process, Danske Bank was awarded the contract in June 2018.

The Department of Social Protection uses commercial banks to make payments directly into a beneficiary’s account by electronic fund transfer (EFT), to issue cheque payments, to receive money by direct debit and standing order, and to lodge money received as either cheque or cash. The Department’s non-banking services consist of cash payments at post offices and this is unaffected by the change of banking provider.

To date, the Department of Social Protection’s banking migration project teams have successfully moved 99.2% of EFT payments and 89.9% of cheque payments to Danske Bank. Direct debits and standing orders have also been moved while cash lodgements are scheduled to migrate to Danske Bank over the next few weeks.

As Danske Bank does not have any branches, it has entered into an agreement with An Post to provide it with a network of outlets covering all of the State.

*Question No. 581 answered with Question No. 578.*

## **Parental Leave**

582. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a process is available for applicants looking to avail of the additional three weeks benefit under parent’s leave and benefit announced in budget 2021 with payment then issuing from her Department’s systems to administer this extension; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12909/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Parent’s Leave and Benefit will be extended from 2 weeks for each parent to 5 weeks as announced in Budget 2021. This extension will be made available retrospectively to parents in respect of children born or adopted on or after 1st November 2019. The period during which this leave can be taken will be extended from 12 to 24 months so it can be taken up to a child’s second birthday or within two years following adoption.

In December 2020, Government approved the drafting of a Parent’s Leave and Benefit (Amendment) Bill, to provide for these statutory amendments. The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has responsibility for parents leave policy and is leading on this legislation.

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I can confirm that my Department will be in a position to process and issue payments in respect of Parent's Leave taken from the date of enactment of the necessary legislation.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Maternity Benefit**

583. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection if matters raised in correspondence (details supplied) relating to maternity benefit will be examined. [12910/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Maternity benefit is a payment made for 26 weeks to employed and self-employed pregnant women who satisfy certain pay-related social insurance (PRSI) contribution conditions. In order to qualify for maternity benefit, a person must be in employment immediately before the first day of her maternity leave. The last day of insurable employment must be within 16 weeks of the end of the week in which her baby is due. If a woman satisfies these conditions and ceases employment within this 16 week timeframe, payment of maternity benefit can commence from the following day. In 2021, it is estimated that my Department will spend approximately €261 million on maternity benefit.

The fundamental qualification criteria for maternity benefit are that a woman must be in insurable employment or self-employment and is entitled to statutory maternity leave. The applicant must also satisfy certain PRSI contribution conditions. These conditions must be satisfied by the applicant in their own right.

Where an individual is not in employment within the 16 week timeframe or has insufficient social insurance contributions to qualify for maternity benefit, they may be eligible for another social welfare payment provided they meet the relevant conditions.

New mothers who do not qualify for maternity benefit may also be eligible for a payment under the supplementary welfare allowance (SWA) scheme. This scheme is considered a "safety net" within the overall social welfare system for eligible people whose means are insufficient to meet their needs and those of their dependents. The main purpose of the scheme is to provide immediate and flexible assistance for those in need who do not qualify for payment under other welfare schemes.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Pension Provisions**

584. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider appointing representatives of affected groups to the Pensions Commission such as groups (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12912/21]

610. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider including representatives from organisations (details supplied) on the Pensions Commission. [13128/21]

612. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will include representatives of key groups that the Pensions Commission's deliberations involve and its decisions will affect (details supplied) and if not, the reason and basis for same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13176/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 584, 610 and 612 together.

The Pensions Commission was established in November 2020 to examine sustainability and eligibility issues with the State Pension and the Social Insurance Fund, in fulfillment of a Programme for Government commitment. These issues are being considered from a perspective of fiscal and social sustainability, and intergenerational fairness. It has held eight meetings to date and will report on its findings by the end of June 2021. In this regard, the Commission is halfway through its work.

Membership of the Commission includes representation of workers, employers, civil society, academics and those with technical and policy expertise. This includes those with involvement in organisations supporting older people. The ICTU nomination on the Commission is a senior representative from SIPTU, a founding member of the Stop 67 coalition, and a member of the Executive Board of the National Women's Council of Ireland. I was keen to ensure that the Commission had strong female representation in its membership, and I am pleased that the majority of members – 7 out of 11 – are women. It is imperative that the Commission has the required expertise to progress its work and is independent in its deliberations. As part of its work, the Commission has been asked to seek the views of recognised experts and representative groups by inviting submissions and presentations. Details on the Commission's work is available on its website, [PensionsCommission.gov.ie](http://PensionsCommission.gov.ie). The Commission's public consultation process closed just this week on the 9th of March. It sought submissions by email or by post from interested parties on sustainable State Pensions arrangements into the future. There was also a survey for those who did not wish to make a formal submission.

I am satisfied that the Commission, with its gender-balanced membership and extensive experience of social and public policy, is well equipped to grasp the potential impacts of any pensions reform options on affected groups, such as women, workers, and older people. It is of particular importance to consider the impact of any potential changes to the State Pension system on those who rely on it for all or most of their income.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputies.

### **Disability Allowance**

585. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the expected timeframe for a decision to be made on an application for the disability allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12916/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Disability Allowance (DA) is a weekly allowance for people with a disability aged between 16 and 66 with a disability expected to last for at least one year and who satisfy the medical condition, means test and are habitually resident in Ireland.

Processing times vary across schemes, depending of the differing qualification criteria. Schemes that require a high level of documentary evidence from the customer, particularly in the case of illness-related schemes, can take longer to process. Similarly, means-tested payments can also require more detailed investigations and interaction with the applicant, thereby lengthening the decision making process.

The average time taken to award a DA claim at the end of February 2021 was five weeks. My Department is committed to ensuring that claims are processed as expeditiously as possible. The DA scheme area is continuously monitored and reviewed to ensure applications are

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processed and customers are responded to as quickly as possible.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Jobseeker's Allowance**

586. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the expected timeframe for a decision to be made on an application for the jobseeker's allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12917/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department is committed to providing a quality service to all its customers, ensuring that applications are processed and that decisions on entitlement are made as quickly as possible.

Processing times vary across schemes, depending on the different qualification criteria. Also, means-tested payments can require more detailed investigation and interaction with the applicant, thereby lengthening the decision-making process.

As at January 2021 the average time for award of Jobseekers Allowance is 2 weeks with 96% of applications being processed within 6 weeks target.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **State Pensions**

587. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the expected timeframe for a decision to be made on an application for the State pension, contributory and non-contributory; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12918/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department is committed to ensuring that State pension claims are processed as quickly as possible. Processing times vary across schemes, depending on the differing qualification criteria. All claims processing is kept under active review.

The operational target for State pension (contributory) claims is 90% of timely applications awarded (where qualified) by entitlement date, currently the applicant's 66th birthday. According to the latest figures available to end February 2021, 95% of these applications were processed by date of entitlement with an average processing time of 5 weeks.

The State pension (non-contributory) scheme (SPNC) has a performance target of 75% of new claims to be awarded (where qualified) within 12 weeks of receipt. The average processing time achieved for SPNC claims to end February 2021 was 88% within 12 weeks with an average processing time of 6 weeks.

Processing of all applications is dependent on the completeness of the application and the availability of all the required information.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Back to Education Allowance**

588. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the expected timeframe for a decision to be made on an application for the back to education allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12919/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Department's Back to Education Allowance provides income support for people who wish to pursue second or third level courses.

In advance of commencing a course of education or training, either part-time or full-time, including springboard courses, a person must establish an entitlement to a qualifying social welfare weekly payment, generally a Jobseeker's payment.

Under the July 2020 Stimulus the Back To Education Allowance has been extended to people who have been in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment. A person will be required to transfer from the Pandemic Unemployment Payment to the relevant qualifying social welfare scheme to continue to receive income support while availing of full-time education provision.

My Department is committed to providing a quality service to all its customers, ensuring that applications are processed and that decisions on entitlement are made as quickly as possible. Currently the average time for award of Jobseekers Benefit is 1 week with 94% of claims processed within 3 weeks and the average time for Jobseekers Allowance is 2 weeks with 96% of applications being processed within 6 weeks.

The Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) Grant, payable by the Department of Education and Skills, represents the primary support for people pursuing third level education and its administration is a matter for that Department.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance Scheme**

589. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the expected timeframe for a decision to be made on an application for the back to school clothing and footwear allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12920/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The back to school clothing and footwear allowance (BSCFA) scheme provides a once-off payment to eligible families to assist with the costs of clothing and footwear when children start or return to school each autumn. The scheme operates from June to September each year.

The allowance is payable in respect of eligible children between the ages of 4 and 17 in respect of whom an increase for a qualified child is being paid and eligible children between the ages of 18 and 22 who are in full-time second level education and in respect of whom a qualified child allowance is being paid.

To qualify for BSCFA, a person must meet a number of conditions namely:

- The child must meet the age criteria.
- The applicant must be in receipt of a qualifying payment and getting an increase in that payment for the qualified child (except in certain circumstances) in the period 1 June to 30 September.
- The assessable income for the household must be within prescribed limits.

- The applicant and the child (or children) in respect of whom the allowance is claimed must be resident in the State.

All applications received for the scheme in 2020 have been processed.

The BSCFA scheme will be open in June 2021. It is planned, similar to previous years, that the majority of payments under this scheme will be paid without the need of an application. These customers will receive their BSCFA payments in the week ending 16 July.

Customers, who do not receive a letter regarding their BSCFA by the end of June can apply for BSCFA online on [www.mywelfare.ie](http://www.mywelfare.ie). The online application will be open from the end of June. Customers who are experiencing issues applying online can contact our contact centre on 071 9193318 or 0818 11 11 13 or alternatively customers can email our dedicated email address, [bscfa@welfare.ie](mailto:bscfa@welfare.ie).

Once received, all applications will be processed in date of receipt order.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Supplementary Welfare Allowance**

590. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the expected timeframe for a decision to be made on an application for the basic supplementary welfare allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12921/21]

595. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the expected timeframe for a decision to be made on an application for the exceptional needs payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12927/21]

600. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the expected timeframe for a decision to be made on an application for the urgent needs payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12932/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 590, 595 and 600 together.

The supplementary welfare allowance (SWA) scheme is the safety net within the overall social welfare system in that it provides assistance to eligible people in the State whose means are insufficient to meet their needs and those of their dependants. Supports provided under the SWA scheme can consist of a basic weekly payment as well as single exceptional needs payments (ENPs) and urgent needs payments (UNPs).

The basic supplementary welfare allowance provides immediate assistance for those in need who are awaiting the outcome of a claim or an appeal for a primary social welfare payment or do not qualify for payment under other State schemes.

Decisions on ENPs and UNPs supplements are made at the discretion of the officers administering the scheme taking into account the requirements of the legislation and all the relevant circumstances of the case in order to ensure that the payments target those most in need of assistance.

Provision of a prompt service is a major objective for the Department's staff dealing with applications for all schemes, and in particular for the supplementary welfare allowance (SWA) scheme which acts as the safety net within the social welfare system.

The timescale for determining applications under the SWA schemes may be dependent, among other things, on the availability of supporting documents needed to consider the application, which may include details of applicant's income and savings, and information to establish the need. If there is any doubt about the validity of a claim, further information or verification may be requested.

I wish to assure the Deputy that the SWA scheme is kept under review to ensure that it continues to a timely response to support those most in need of assistance. If the Deputy has concerns in respect of a particular case, he should bring the details to the attention of the Department.

Anyone who wishes to make an application for a payment under the SWA scheme should contact the Community Welfare Service at their local Intreo Centre. There is a national Income Support Helpline in place (1890 800 024) which will assist callers to make contact with the appropriate office.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **Blind Person's Pension**

591. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the expected timeframe for a decision to be made on an application for the blind pension; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12922/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The current timeframe for a decision on an application for the Blind Pension is 4.5 weeks.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Carer's Allowance**

592. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the expected timeframe for a decision to be made on an application for the carer's allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12923/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Carer's allowance (CA) is a means-tested social assistance payment made to a person who is habitually resident in the State and who is providing full-time care and attention to a child or an adult who has such a disability that as a result they require that level of care.

At the end of February 2021 the average number of weeks to award new Carer's Allowance applications was 4 weeks. My Department is committed to providing a quality service to all its customers, ensuring that applications are processed and that decisions on entitlement are made as quickly as possible. Once all of the necessary information is provided, there are currently no delays in processing claims.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Carer's Support Grant**

593. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the expected

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timeframe for a decision to be made on an application for the carer's support grant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12924/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Carer's Support Grant (CSG) is paid automatically to people in receipt of Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit or Domiciliary Care Allowance. Other people who are not in receipt of a social welfare payment but who are providing full time care and attention are also eligible and can apply for the grant. The payment is made regardless of the carer's means but is subject to certain conditions, one of which is that the period of full-time care and attention must last for at least six months. This period of care must include the first Thursday in June.

There are currently no delays in processing Carer's Support Grant applications. Once the necessary information is provided by the claimant a decision will be made on an application for the carer's support grant without delay. My Department is committed to providing a quality service to all its customers, ensuring that applications are processed and that decisions on entitlement are made as quickly as possible.

The 2021 Carer's Support Grant is payable on the 3rd June. Applications for the 2021 Carer's Support Grant can be submitted from the week of 5th April 2021 to the 31st December 2022.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Domiciliary Care Allowance**

594. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the expected timeframe for a decision to be made on an application for the domiciliary care allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12926/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Domiciliary Care Allowance has a target of deciding 90% of new claims within 10 weeks of receipt. The average processing time for new applications in 2020 was 8 weeks and this is still being achieved to date in 2021. Since April 2020, the monthly target of deciding 90% of claims within 10 weeks has been achieved every month, with the latest figures for February 2021 showing that 96% of claims were decided within the 10 week target timeframe.

Processing times can vary depending on the volume of applications received, availability of resources and complexity of individual cases. All of these factors are continuously monitored to ensure targets are achieved.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

*Question No. 595 answered with Question No. 590.*

### **Fuel Allowance**

596. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the expected timeframe for a decision to be made on an application for the fuel allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12928/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Fuel Allowance is a means tested payment to assist pensioners and other long-term social welfare dependent household-

ers with their winter heating costs. The payment is a contribution towards heating costs, it is not intended to meet these costs in full. The payment is made at the weekly rate of €28.00; or if preferred, by way of two lump sum payments; and is paid over the winter season (28 weeks in the 2020/2021 fuel allowance season). Only one Fuel Allowance is payable per household.

Fuel Allowance applications are processed by the customer's primary scheme payment area, across a number of different (IT) platforms. For this reason, the average waiting time for a decision on a Fuel Allowance application can vary. Decision waiting times can also fluctuate based on the level of applications received, for example during or outside of the winter fuel allowance season. Additionally, where further information is requested before a decision on eligibility can be made (generally relating to means or household composition), delays in the provision of the required information can occur. While it is not possible to provide an average timeframe for a Fuel Allowance decision, given the variables set out, my Department is currently unaware of any area experiencing any delays in processing of Fuel Allowance applications for customers.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Household Benefits Scheme**

597. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the expected timeframe for a decision to be made on an application for the household benefits package; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12929/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Household Benefits Package is a set of allowances aimed at assisting qualifying recipients with their household running costs. It includes an allowance towards their electricity or gas costs, as well as the cost of their television licence.

The current average turnaround time for Household Benefit Package applications is one week.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Invalidity Pension**

598. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the expected timeframe for a decision to be made on an application for the invalidity pension; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12930/21]

**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 average timeframe for a decision to be made on an application for an IP claim is currently 5 weeks. The Department is committed to ensuring that claims and reviews are processed as expeditiously as possible.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy

### **One-Parent Family Payment**

599. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the expected timeframe for a decision to be made on an application for the one-parent family payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12931/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department is committed to providing a quality service to all its customers, ensuring that applications are processed and that decisions on entitlement are made as quickly as possible.

Processing times vary across schemes, depending on the different qualification criteria. Also, means-tested payments can require more detailed investigation and interaction with the applicant, thereby lengthening the decision-making process.

As at January 2021 I can confirm that 95% of applications for One Parent Family Allowance were processed within 10 weeks and that, on average, applications are awarded within 2 weeks.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

*Question No. 600 answered with Question No. 590.*

### **Community Employment Schemes**

601. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of plans to provide pension provision as per a 2008 Labour Court recommendation for community employment supervisors; the engagement under way; the timeframe for a decision; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12947/21]

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

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

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

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

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

The current position is that officials from my Department, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform are engaging in discussions on this issue and I am hopeful that, with good-

will and flexibility on all sides, a resolution can be found in the near future.

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

As the Deputy will be aware, these matters take time to resolve given the complexity of the subject, the wider financial implications and the number of parties involved. It is therefore not possible at the present time to predict, how much more time is required to bring this matter to a satisfactory conclusion. Nevertheless I, and my colleague the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform are keen to find an approach that will resolve this issue as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Internships**

602. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under her aegis in 2019; the cost in terms of wages and allowances; and the estimated numerical capacity of State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis. [12962/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** There are two agencies under the aegis of my Department - the Citizens Information Board (CIB) and the Pensions Authority.

Two students undertook unpaid work experience in The Pensions Authority in 2019. The work experience was for a period of two weeks in one case and for a period of one day in the other. The Pensions Authority have the capacity to provide unpaid work experience in the future on an ad-hoc basis.

No students undertook work experience or internships in The Citizens Information Board in 2019. CIB would be open to exploring a work experience or internship scheme for students, but given the constraints of the salary budget, this would most likely have to be unpaid. CIB has no plans at present for a work experience or internship scheme.

### **Community Employment Schemes**

603. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will make changes to a service agreement with local community employment sponsor groups (details supplied) in County Cork to ensure the continuation of the individually and communally beneficial scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13001/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** At a meeting held on 27/01/2021 with representatives from the CE sponsors, a range of issues causing concern was outlined. Following this meeting, my colleague Minister Humphreys and I announced a number of changes to CE, on Tuesday 2nd March, which substantially address the concerns raised.

Amongst the issues raised were the implications of a 2017 rule change that affected CE participants aged 55 years and older who were on CE in July 2017. We have confirmed that this cohort 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.

As the Deputy will be aware, since the start of the Pandemic, Ministers Humphreys and I have approved the extension of CE participant contracts that would have come to an end during Level 5 restrictions on a number of occasions. We have now provided for a further extension up to the 2nd July.

I would also like to reassure the Deputy and the CE scheme in Skibbereen that, subsequent to the final extension date, there will be a planned ending of contracts on a phased basis, over a period of time, in order to ensure continuity of local services. Department officials will be working on the ground with CE schemes to support them in managing this process.

I remain committed to continuing 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.

### **Registration of Deaths**

604. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a death registered before the enactment of the amended section 37 of the Civil Registration Act 2004 can have the qualified informant to the registration of a death, cohabitant, added to a death certificate as this does not alter the facts of the death in any way; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13015/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Section 37 of the Civil Registration Act 2004 was amended with effect from 20 November 2020 to allow additional persons, including cohabitants, to act as qualified informants for the purposes of registering the death of a loved one. This new provision sought to address the issue of cohabitants not being officially recognised for the purposes of registering the death.

Previously, the duty to register a death fell to a family member or civil partner to the exclusion of cohabitants unless no other relative was available to do so.

The legislative measures introduced from 20 November 2020 are not retrospective in nature. This means that any deaths registered prior to this date cannot be amended to show “cohabitant” as a qualified informant.

I hope that this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Disability Allowance**

605. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of a disability allowance application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13036/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Based on the evidence supplied in support of their application for disability allowance (DA), this person’s application was disallowed on the grounds that the medical qualifying condition was not satisfied. They were notified in writing of this decision on 31 August 2020.

The person concerned requested an appeal of the decision and submitted additional medical evidence for consideration. The Social Welfare Appeals Office decided, based on this additional evidence, that the medical qualifying condition was satisfied.

On 11 February 2021 the person concerned was awarded DA from 6 January 2021. A review has been carried out and DA has now been awarded from 12 August 2020. The first payment was made by her chosen payment method on 3 March 2021.

Arrears of payment due will issue as soon as possible once any necessary adjustment is calculated and applied in respect of any overlapping payments (if applicable).

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Job Losses**

606. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the correspondence and interaction there have been between her Department and the board of a group (details supplied) regarding the pending job losses at its site in Raheen, County Limerick; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13053/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I received formal notification from this employer on 17 February 2021 of proposed collective redundancies at this site. I noted and welcomed the employer's commitment to engage in a consultation process with affected employees from the week beginning 21 February in order to identify solutions and reach agreement in relation to the proposed redundancies. I also noted the employer's commitment that, where a decision was taken to proceed with the proposed redundancies following the period of consultation, the employer would honour the employees' contractual and statutory rights with respect to a redundancy package as part of this process.

The Department has worked closely with this employer in similar circumstances previously and is doing so again in relation to this particular issue. The employer contacted my Department officials directly to request assistance with managing the employee's social welfare entitlements post-redundancy. A local Department Area Manager has been nominated to liaise with a nominee from the employer involved. It has been agreed that all enquiries from this employer to my Department will be coordinated through this liaison person. Information packs containing application forms for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, Disability Allowance and information on the EmployAbility Service and the Department's Activation Services were issued to the employer on 25 February. At a local level, dedicated staff in my Department have been assigned to work directly with the employees affected by this redundancy to ensure they receive their proper entitlements and appropriate supports.

Arrangements have also been made to ensure that any social welfare claims arising from the company closure will be expedited. My Department will work to ensure that the employees will be able to access their entitlements swiftly and in a manner that does not cause any further distress.

I hope this clarifies the issue for the Deputy.

### **Redundancy Payments**

607. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will intervene with the board of a group (details supplied) to ensure the previously agreed severance package is honoured. [13055/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department provides a subsidy to this employer through the Wage Subsidy Scheme. The Wage Subsidy Scheme

gives financial incentives to private sector employers to employ people with a disability.

I received notification from this employer on 17 February 2021 of proposed collective redundancies at a place of business. I noted and welcomed the employer's commitment to engage in a consultation process with affected employees from the week beginning 21 February in order to identify solutions and reach agreement in relation to the proposed redundancies. I also noted the employer's commitment that, where a decision was taken to proceed with the proposed redundancies following the period of consultation, the employer would honour the employees' contractual and statutory rights with respect to a redundancy package as part of this process.

It is the employer's responsibility to pay all eligible employees their redundancy entitlements. The law sets out various entitlements for employees following redundancy. Matters relating to redundancy legislation are a matter for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

At a local level, dedicated staff in my Department have been assigned to work directly with the employees affected by this redundancy to ensure they receive their proper entitlements and appropriate supports. Arrangements have also been made to ensure that any social welfare claims arising from the company closure will be expedited.

I hope this clarifies the issue for the Deputy.

### **Disability Allowance**

608. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason for the delay in issuing payment including arrears to a person (details supplied) who has been approved for disability allowance; and if the claim will be backdated to the date of their original application. [13061/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Based on the evidence supplied in support of their application for disability allowance (DA), this person's application was disallowed on the grounds that the medical qualifying condition was not satisfied and for having means in excess of the statutory limit for their circumstances. They were notified in writing of this decision on 22 October 2019.

A review of this decision was carried out on 20 February 2020 and the decision was upheld regarding the medical condition. It was decided that the means condition was satisfied with effect from 20 November 2019.

The person concerned requested an appeal of the decision and submitted additional medical evidence for consideration. The Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO) decided, based on this additional evidence, that the medical qualifying condition was satisfied.

DA is a means-tested payment. On 24 February 2021 the person concerned was asked to supply documentation in relation to their means. This information is required by the deciding officer in order to implement the SWAO decision. Once the deciding officer receives this information, the Department will be able to proceed with this decision.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment**

609. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection when pandemic unemployment payment arrears will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13063/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The customer concerned will receive arrears of €700 for the period 08/01/21 to 21/01/21 with his PUP payment on the 16/03/21.

*Question No. 610 answered with Question No. 584.*

### **Supplementary Welfare Allowance**

611. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of applicants awarded the supplementary welfare allowance to date in 2021; the number of applications submitted by county; and the purposes for which funding was allocated. [13149/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The supplementary welfare allowance (SWA) scheme is the safety net within the overall social welfare system in that it provides assistance to eligible people in the State whose means are insufficient to meet their needs and those of their dependants. Supports provided under the SWA scheme can consist of a basic weekly payment, a weekly or monthly supplement in respect of certain expenses, as well as single exceptional needs payments (ENPs) and urgent needs payments (UNPs).

The basic supplementary welfare allowance provides immediate assistance for those in need who are awaiting the outcome of a claim or an appeal for a primary social welfare payment or do not qualify for payment under other State schemes.

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

Under the SWA scheme, a supplement can be awarded to assist with ongoing or recurring costs that cannot be met from the client's own resources and are deemed to be necessary. In addition, officers can make a single exceptional needs payment to help meet essential, once-off expenditure which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet out of their weekly income. Decisions on ENPs and SWA supplements are made at the discretion of the officers administering the scheme taking into account the requirements of the legislation and all the relevant circumstances of the case.

Statistics are maintained on the number of applications awarded under the SWA scheme. They are not maintained on the number of applications received or the outcome of those applications.

Table 1 shows the number of Basic SWA and supplement recipients by county, at end of February 2021.

Table 2 shows the number of ENPs and UNPs paid by county to end of February 2021.

Table 3 shows the number of ENPs and UNPs paid by category to end of February 2021.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

**Tabular Statement****Table 1 Basic SWA and supplement recipients by county at February 2021**

County	Basic SWA	Rent Supplement	Other Supplements
Carlow	184	200	51
Cavan	67	213	24
Clare	92	145	387
Cork	957	2,388	87
Donegal	234	164	1,479
Dublin	4,615	10,158	100
Galway	288	851	59
Kerry	255	792	147
Kildare	408	911	78
Kilkenny	288	162	99
Laois	120	147	11
Leitrim	45	64	551
Limerick	389	505	57
Longford	69	72	58
Louth	435	174	95
Mayo	183	311	50
Meath	359	325	148
Monaghan	133	135	40
Offaly	191	74	7
Roscommon	187	132	245
Sligo	116	144	45
Tipperary	446	192	118
Waterford	315	153	79
Westmeath	156	403	122
Wexford	291	441	51
Wicklow	567	721	44
Total	11,390	19,977	4,232

**Table 2 - Number of ENPs and UNPs paid by county for 2021 (end of February)**

County	Number of Payments
Carlow	98
Cavan	127
Clare	206
Cork	711
Donegal	203
Dublin	2,871
Galway	188
Kerry	205
Kildare	433
Kilkenny	145
Laois	268

County	Number of Payments
Leitrim	112
Limerick	325
Longford	169
Louth	254
Mayo	159
Meath	389
Monaghan	35
Offaly	114
Roscommon	110
Sligo	171
Tipperary	397
Waterford	228
Westmeath	200
Wexford	112
Wicklow	347
Total	8,577

**Table 3 - Number of ENPs and UNPs paid by category for 2021 (end of February)**

Category	Number of Payments
Bills	263
Child Related	326
Clothing	1,400
Funeral	440
General	2,139
Housing	3,733
Illness	215
Urgent Needs Payment	61
Total	8,577

*Question No. 612 answered with Question No. 584.*

### Exceptional Needs Payment

613. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a family (details supplied) can qualify for a once-off exceptional needs payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13260/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** According to the records of my Department, the 2nd person concerned made an application for an Exceptional Needs Payment (ENP) on 15/02/2021. This claim was disallowed as it was determined on the basis of the application and supporting documentation provided that the need was not exceptional and it was considered reasonable that the person concerned had sufficient means to cover the costs from household income

A decision letter dated 23/02/2021 issued to the person concerned advising her of the outcome of her application and affording her the option of seeking a review of the designated officer's decision. My officials have advised that a request for a review has not been received

from the person concerned.

If the circumstances of the person concerned have changed since her last ENP application it is open to her to submit a new application by contacting her local Community Welfare Officer at (087) 9638588 or by email at [KildareCWS@welfare.ie](mailto:KildareCWS@welfare.ie).

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **Domiciliary Care Allowance**

614. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of a domiciliary care allowance application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13325/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person concerned was notified on the 4th March 2021 that her Domiciliary Care Allowance has been awarded on appeal from the 1st February 2020. Arrears due for this period will issue with her March 2021 payment on the 16th March 2021.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **State Pensions**

615. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the availability of the option under the Social Welfare (Consolidation) Act 2005 to direct that subsection 1 shall not be applied in the case of a person who having been a self-employed contributor makes a claim for the old age State pension (contributory) under section 110(2) of the Act with particular reference to the case of a person (details supplied); if she will request a review into the case with a view to putting the old age State pension (contributory) in payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13330/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department is guided by the governing legislation and there is no discretion to direct that Section 110 (1) of the Act shall not be applied. Section 110 (2) was superseded by section 9 of Social Welfare and Pensions (No. 2) Act 2009, which came into operation on 1 January 2010.

Therefore, under current social welfare legislation, a self-employed contributor will not be regarded as satisfying the contribution conditions for State pension (contributory) unless the person has paid self-employment contributions in respect of at least one contribution year prior to reaching age 66 and all self-employment contributions payable have been paid.

While the person concerned has paid self-employment (Class S) contributions for the tax years 2006 to 2014, all self-employment contributions were paid after the person reached age 66. Therefore, under the governing legislation, the eligibility conditions for State pension (contributory) have not been satisfied.

The person concerned was notified of this decision in writing on 19 November 2019. Following a requested review, this decision remained unchanged, and the person was advised accordingly on 11 March 2020. The person then appealed their pension decision to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office. Their appeal was disallowed on 27 July 2020 as the self-employment contributions are not eligible in the calculation of pension entitlement.

It remains open to the person concerned to apply for State pension (non-contributory). An application form has issued to them. On receipt of a completed application form, their eligibility for this pension can be determined and they will be notified in writing of the decision.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Invalidity Pension**

616. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of an appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13337/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered with that office on 2 October 2020. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant Departmental papers and comments by the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought. These papers were received on 29 October 2020.

The appeal was referred to an Appeals Officer on 3 November 2020. The Appeals Officer, having fully considered all of the available evidence, has decided to allow the appeal of the person concerned by way of a summary decision. The person concerned has been notified of the Appeals Officer's decision.

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

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Carer's Allowance**

617. **Deputy Mark Ward** 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. [13389/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Carer's allowance (CA) is a means-tested social assistance payment made to a person who is habitually resident in the State and who is providing full-time care and attention to a child or an adult who has such a disability that as a result they require that level of care.

CA reviews take place in a number of circumstances as follows:-

- If the decision on a new claim is negative the customer has the option of a review.
- Once claims are in payment, my Department undertakes periodic reviews as part of its control strategy to ensure that there is continued entitlement.
- A customer can at any stage request a review of their entitlement.

As outlined above, a wide range of reviews are carried out arising from customer requests, together with reviews undertaken by the Department. At present, although some control reviews are being carried out, the Department is prioritising reviews where a customer has notified us of a change in circumstances and may have an entitlement to an increase in rate, or where the revised decision will provide for award of payment.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Schemes Data**

618. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated cost of the support payments to her Department for those seeking international protection as provided for in the White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13426/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I welcome that Minister O’Gorman has brought the White Paper to end Direct Provision and to establish a new International Protection Support Service to Government, which will meet the Government commitment to end direct provision. This White Paper outlines a model for developing a new International Protection Accommodation and Support System that will be implemented between now and the end of 2024.

My Department is committed to supporting this process of change and my officials will continue to work with colleagues in Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth as we move to implement this new model.

The new model proposes a two-phase approach to accommodating applicants for international protection. In Phase 1, my Department will continue to provide Daily Expenses Allowance, as the income support payment to protection applicants while they stay in the Reception and Integration centre. The estimated cost for daily expenses allowance in the first 4 months in the Reception and Integration centre to my Department is €3.7m. These costings have been developed based on the assumption that the new model needs to have capacity to meet the needs of 3,500 applicants per year, of whom one-third will be children.

In Phase 2, applicants will move out of the Reception and Integration Centres to accommodation in the community. While it is envisaged that my Department will provide a payment channel for the new International Protection Payments on behalf of Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, it is that department which will retain the policy and budget for the payments.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

619. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons in receipt of the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment by each of the four payment rates by age, gender and occupation in County Wexford from 16 October 2020 to date in tabular form. [13441/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The information requested by the Deputy is set out in the attached tables.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-10\_pq619-10-03-2021\_en.doc">Covid 19 PUP</a>]

### **National Economic and Social Council**

620. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she has read the recent NESc report on the self-employed. [12564/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I can advise the Deputy that I am aware of the National Economic and Social Council (NESc) paper on 'The Position of the Self-Employed' that was published last November. I note that the paper considers a number of issues concerning self-employed workers, and groups these into the four policy areas of: the social insurance contributions made by self-employed workers; the social protection supports provided to them; the differentiation between employed and self-employed workers; and representation for self-employed workers.

With respect to the level of contribution to the social insurance fund by self-employed workers, they are now covered for most of the benefits available under the social insurance scheme which represents approximately 93% of the value of all benefits paid by the social insurance fund - in return for a contribution of 11 percentage points lower than that made in respect of employed contributors. As the Deputy will be aware, the Programme for Government includes a commitment that consideration will be given to increasing all classes of PRSI over time to replenish the Social Insurance Fund to help pay for measures and changes to be agreed and the NESc paper will inform my Department's consideration in that regard.

The second issue relates to the levels of welfare support provided to self-employed workers. My Department offers a range of income supports to self-employed people, including -

- jobseeker's benefit (self-employed),
- the option of applying for a means tested jobseeker's allowance instead depending on their personal circumstances,
- the pandemic unemployment payment,
- facilitating self-employed workers who are in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment and who are seeking to maintain their business, to earn up to €960 over an eight week period while maintaining their full payment entitlement,
- the enhanced illness benefit payment of €350 per week where they have been medically diagnosed with COVID or have been medically advised to self-isolate or restrict their movements,
- the back to work enterprise allowance scheme which offers support to people who are long-term unemployed and who are interested in self-employment as a route to entering the labour market - this allowance is payable to self-employed workers for up to a 24-month period from the commencement of their new business,
- the once-off enterprise support grant of up to €1,000 to assist with the costs associated with reopening a business following the imposition of Covid-related restrictions, and
- my Department's employment support services on a voluntary basis through their local Intreo Centre.

With respect to the categorisation of self-employed workers matter, my Department's social welfare inspectorate carry out, as part of their duties, employer investigations to ensure compliance with social insurance law and employment status investigations form part of this work. The approach to addressing potential false self-employment includes the setting up of a new team of inspectors in late 2019 to focus entirely on detecting and investigating such practices. In recognising the need to increase awareness in this area, my Department is leading an inter-

departmental group on updating and revising the important ‘*Code of Practice for Determining Employment or Self-Employment*’. In consultation with other departments and the social partners, I expect this revised Code to be published in the coming months.

Finally, in the area of representation, industrial relations in Ireland rests on a voluntary model. The State’s role is largely restricted to the development of an institutional framework supportive of a voluntary system that is premised upon freedom of contract and freedom of association. Progressing matters of representation come within the remit of my colleague, the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Pensions Reform**

621. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Social Protection her views on whether the living alone allowance should be accessed as income when calculating the income threshold for pensioners. [13484/21]

622. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she plans to gradually increase the income threshold for pensioners for entitlements in forthcoming budgets. [13485/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 622 and 621 together.

The Department provides income supports through contributory payments (which are based on a person’s social insurance record) and means-tested social assistance payments. Social welfare legislation provides that the means test takes account of the income and assets of the person (and spouse or partner, if applicable) applying for the relevant scheme.

The State Pension Contributory (SPC) is a contributory payment and, as such, is not means tested. A recipient of the SPC can claim an increase to their pension in respect of a qualified adult (IQA). A qualified adult is the spouse / partner of the pensioner who is being wholly or mainly maintained by the pensioner.

An increase for a qualified adult may be payable at the maximum rate of payment where the means of the spouse/partner are €100 a week or less, while reduced rates are payable where the means are over €100 and less than €310 per week. No increase is payable where the means of the spouse/partner are in excess of €310 per week.

The State Pension Non-Contributory (SPNC) is a means-tested payment for people aged 66 or over who do not qualify for the SPC based on their social insurance record.

As such, all recipients of the SPNC are subject to a means test. 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 all income and property (other than the family home) belonging to the claimant.

To calculate the rate payable, the means of the claimant is deducted from the maximum rate of SPNC. In cases where the means of the claimant exceed the maximum rate, the claimant is not entitled to any payment.

SPNC recipients can earn up to €200 per week from employment without their rate of pay-

ment being affected. In addition, the first €30 of means from any source is also disregarded.

The living alone allowance is not taken into account in the means test for the SPNC or the means test for a SPC recipient's qualified adult.

Increasing either the income disregards for the SPNC or the income thresholds for an IQA on the SPC may have significant cost implications and would need to be considered in an overall budgetary and policy context.

### **Personal Public Service Numbers**

623. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a person (details supplied) will receive their PPSN; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13509/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I can confirm that my Department has allocated a Personal Public Service Number (PPSN) to the individual referred to by the Deputy. A letter issued on 8th March 2021 with details of her PPSN.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **School Meals Programme**

624. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of the hot school meals initiative; when a review of the pilot scheme can be expected; and if the scheme will be extended in the future. [13543/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The school meals programme provides funding towards the provision of food to some 1,557 schools and organisations benefitting 227,000 children. The objective of the programme is to provide regular, nutritious food to children who are unable, due to lack of good quality food, to take full advantage of the education provided to them. The programme is an important component of policies to encourage school attendance and extra educational achievement.

Funding is based on a rate of payment per meal, per child, per day. Until 2019, a hot meal was only provided through a dinner club which was primarily offered in schools with onsite cooking facilities.

In Budget 2019, funding was provided for a pilot scheme from September 2019, providing hot school meals in primary schools at a cost of €1m for 2019 and €2.5m in 2020. The pilot involved 37 schools benefitting 6,744 students for the 2019/2020 academic year and was aimed primarily at schools with no onsite cooking facilities. Budget 2020 provided an additional €4 million in funding to extend the hot meals for children currently receiving the cold lunch option, which would allow my department to extend the hot meals to an additional 35,000 children. A decision was made to delay the extension of the hot meals to January 2021 because of the closure of schools due to the Covid-19 Pandemic from 13 March 2020.

In Budget 2021, I have provided an additional €5.5m for this extension from January 2021 to 35,000 primary school children currently receiving the cold lunch option.

Officials from my Department issued invitations for expressions of interest to some 700 primary schools in November 2020. A total of 282 expressions of interest were received. Due to the latest school closures, as a result of the Level 5 restrictions, the selection process has been

deferred until schools re-open later this month.

The Evaluation of the Hot Meals Pilot which was completed in July 2020 found that all stakeholders indicated that the pilot project had a positive impact on children's diet, behaviour, attentiveness and psychological wellbeing. I intend to publish the evaluation report shortly.

I trust that this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Departmental Advertising**

625. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Social Protection the amount spent across her Department on advertising in relation to Covid-19 by month and by media outlet (details supplied) from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021. [13566/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Department delivered 20 public information campaigns related to COVID-19 from March 2020 to March 2021. The aim of these campaigns was to increase public awareness of the available income supports and Department services during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The full cost of COVID-19 related public information campaigns was €1,826,918 excluding VAT, agency fees and creative/design fees. These costs include all advertising in national and regional print publications as well as national and regional radio costs detailed below. There were no costs incurred TV campaigns.

Two of these public information campaigns ran in January 2021 and have not yet been fully invoiced. Costs provided for these campaigns are therefore as per the campaign budget, are not final and may vary slightly.

The detailed spend per media channel requested is outlined in the table below.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-10\_pq625-10-03-2021\_en.docx">Covid 19 Advertising</a>]

### **Direct Provision System**

626. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when he plans to establish the new international protection support service to deal with applicants for international protection; the staff complement that will be seconded to this new organisation; the structure and budget of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13398/21]

627. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he has requested an association (details supplied) to develop the national settlement pattern as per the contents of the White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13403/21]

653. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will identify the resettlement workers referred to in the White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service who will oversee and link applicants for international protection with supports and services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13396/21]

656. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the relevant Departments, agencies and NGOs that will constitute the programme board to oversee the governance and implementation of the new regime to replace the direct provision model for applicants for international protection; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13425/21]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 626, 627, 653 and 656 together.

As the Deputy will be aware I have now published the White Paper on ending the ‘Direct Provision’ system of accommodation and support services. The White Paper sets out a new Government policy to establish a new International Protection Support Service.

The transition to the new system will be led by my Department and progress will be monitored by a Programme Board whose membership will include Government Departments, Agencies, Local Authorities, NGOs and former International Protection applicants. I will shortly begin the process of establishing the Programme Board and will announce the Board once the members have been appointed.

I am also establishing the expert Transition Team who will be tasked with developing a detailed Implementation Plan which will set out the process and timelines for establishing the new model.

### **Direct Provision System**

628. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the cost to the State of the direct provision system in each of the past ten years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13405/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** My Department currently has contracts in place for 49 accommodation centres, including management contracts for 7 State owned centres. The 49 centres comprise 45 accommodation centres for International Protection applicants, the National Reception Centre for International Protection applicants in Baleskin, Co. Dublin and 3 Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres (EROC) for refugees brought to Ireland under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP).

Due to continuing increases in the numbers applying for international protection in recent years, these centres reached full operational capacity in September 2018 and a number of premises, hotels and guesthouses, were contracted to provide accommodation on a short-term basis until additional accommodation centres could be provided under a regional tendering competition. There are currently 25 such accommodation premises currently being used to accommodate international protection applicants on a temporary basis.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, my Department also provided 4 dedicated self-isolation facilities for residents in 2020. One of these is still under contract as well as 2 quarantine centres, one for residents who had left their allocated accommodation to live temporarily with family or friends and a second for newly arrived International Protection applicants seeking accommodation.

My Department contracts for an all-inclusive service, which includes catering services, as well as cleaning, maintenance and laundry services.

The below table provides the total costs in each of the last ten years.

Year	Expenditure in millions
2010	€79.1
2011	€69.5
2012	€62.3
2013	€55.2
2014	€53.2
2015	€57.025
2016	€64.137
2017	€67.359
2018	€77.993
2019	€129.408
2020	€183.037

### Maternity Leave

629. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if a person (details supplied) is entitled to an extension of maternity leave due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13436/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Maternity Protection Acts provide for up to 26 weeks paid maternity leave, and a further 16 weeks unpaid leave. Where a child is born prematurely, additional weeks may be available.

There are currently no plans to extend this form of leave.

There have been a number of developments in terms of leave for working parents in recent years, notably, in 2019, the extension of parental leave up to 26 weeks for a child under 12 years and the introduction of two weeks paid Parent’s Leave and Benefit for each parent in the first year of a child’s life.

In order to support parents of children born during the strict lockdown measures, the Government intends to extend Parents’ Leave from two weeks to five weeks for each parent of all children born or adopted on or after 1 November 2019. The Family Leave Bill 2021 was approved by the Government on 9 March 2021. The aim is that this legislation will be enacted by the beginning of April 2021.

### Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

630. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the reason the terms of reference for the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation omitted to cover illegal birth registrations.. [13756/21]

639. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the reason persons whose births were illegally registered, incorrectly registered or who were illegally adopted were excluded from the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes.. [12633/21]

**Minister for Children and Youth Affairs(Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I propose to take

Questions Nos. 630 and 639 together.

The experiences of persons whose births were illegally registered, incorrectly registered or who were illegally adopted, were not excluded from the Commission of Investigation (Mother and Baby Homes and certain related Matters).

The Terms of Reference for the Commission were developed in accordance with the legislative requirements of the Commissions of Investigations Act 2004, and agreed by Government. The draft Government Order to establish the Commission was also approved by both Houses of the Oireachtas. The overarching objective in developing the terms of reference was to establish a Commission capable of providing a full account of what happened in these institutions over the period 1922-1998.

The Terms of Reference were focused on a combination of four distinct factors:

- Clarifying that the intended focus is on single women and children being accommodated for the purpose of receiving extended and supervised maternity and infant care services in Mother and Baby Homes;

- Defining the specific issues of public concern as discrete matters to be investigated;

- Specifying a list of Mother and Baby Homes and, in addition, providing for examination of equivalent experiences within the network of County Homes;

- Defining the relevant period as being from 1922 to 1998, while allowing the Commission to reduce the “relevant period” in respect of any component part or institution if it considers it appropriate to do so.

Therefore, the approach taken provided for the intended clear and deliberate emphasis on the experiences of women and children who spent time in Mother and Baby Homes.

In examining the exit pathways of children, the Commission was required to investigate the nature of the relationship between Mother and Baby Homes and other key institutions – these included children’s homes; orphanages; and adoption societies. This involved the identification of patterns of referral and the practices and arrangements for the placement of children. It also included where an intermediary organisation was involved in arranging a subsequent placement.

The examination was also to identify the extent to which children’s welfare and best interests were considered in making arrangements for their placement both here in Ireland and abroad. The Commission was further asked to identify the extent of mothers’ participation in such decisions, including procedures around mothers’ consent, and the extent to which these procedures were sufficient to ensure that consent was full, free and informed. The Commission was therefore provided with sufficient scope to examine the placing of children for adoption at home and abroad, as well as to examine situations in which the child’s parentage was concealed, either by omission or sometimes, by illegal means.

The Commission’s final Report addresses important questions in relation to the practices in place during the period under investigation. The Commission was able to cross-reference information from the institutional records, State records, testimony from witnesses and evidence from other sources.

It is accepted by all parties that, in the past, the arrangements for the placement of children often involved secretive practices, carried out without due regard to the rights of those involved. Such practices reflected wider societal prejudices of the time. Today, the safeguards in the adop-

tion acts ensure that the best interests of the child are the paramount consideration in all adoption cases, and in every step of the process.

Separate to the work of the Commission, I have just published an independent review report into incorrect birth registrations. This independent report was commissioned following Tulsa's discovery in early 2018 of evidence of illegal birth registrations in the files of the St. Patrick's Guild adoption society.

While this review was unable to identify a unique marker suggestive of illegal birth registration in the sampled files I know significant concerns remain about the practice of illegal birth registrations. For that reason, I have asked the Special Rapporteur on Child Protection to consider the very significant complexities and challenges, including the deep ethical issues, which arise in relation to the issue of illegal birth registrations, and to propose an appropriate course of action.

### Foster Care

631. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the situation in respect of insurance cover for foster children, particularly in regard to farm accidents, given foster children are not deemed by insurance policies to be family or a visitor; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12485/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** The National Treasury Management Agency (Delegation of Claims Management Functions) Order (S.I No. 571 of 2019) was made in November 2019. This order was made under section 9 of the National Treasury Management Agency (Amendment) Act 2000.

This order means that there is state indemnity for all foster carers in respect of any claims for personal injury and/or third party property damage that arises when carrying out approved activities as a Foster Carer. In addition, state indemnity extends to cover a claim for personal injury to a foster child (or former foster child) due to the alleged negligence of the Foster Carer.

An information leaflet is being developed by the state claims agency and Tusla which will provide details for foster carers on how to report an incident that may result in a claim.

### Childcare Services

632. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the position regarding pregnant childcare workers and Covid-19 public health restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12495/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** Public health advice in relation to Covid-19 and pregnancy is provided by the HSE at <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus-and-pregnancy.html>. This advice is based on the latest evidence available and is kept under review.

It is important to note that, at this point in time, the HSE has not categorised pregnant women as falling within the High Risk or Very High Risk groups in relation to Covid-19 (<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/people-at-higher-risk.html>).

My Department does not have an employer role in relation to the staff in Early Learning and Care (ELC) or School-Age Childcare (SAC) services and so it cannot provide occupational

health advice or services. It is a matter for individual employers to work with pregnant employees (as they do with all vulnerable employees) to assess their work environment and make relevant adjustments, as appropriate to their circumstances. In doing so they should take the HSE advice on high risk, very high risk and pregnancy into consideration.

ELC and SAC practitioners are advised to speak with their GP if they have particular concerns about their own situation.

### **Early Childhood Care and Education**

633. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the status of an application by a person (details supplied). [12575/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme is a universal pre-school programme available to all children within the eligible age range.

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.

Exemptions for the age requirements for the ECCE programme provided by my Department are considered with regard to three guiding principles:

- That the child will be attending school or will be registered with Tusla as being educated in a place other than a recognised school by the time they turn 6.
- That a specialist has recommended the additional time in ECCE; and
- That the child has not already availed of the full two years of ECCE.

If the child referred to remained in ECCE for an additional year he would be over 6 years of age, therefore the application was not approved. It is important to note that the overage exemption cannot provide a waiver for the statutory obligations on parents with regard to educational provision when the child turns 6.

In deciding on applications for exemptions to the ECCE age requirements, my Department is guided by a review of the overage exemption process which was carried out by the National Disability Authority for my Department and the Department of Education in 2018. In their published report they concluded that it is in the best interest of children with additional needs to transition to primary school with their age cohort.

I would encourage the parents to seek the assistance of the Department of Education and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) with regard to the supports that are available for their child in a primary school setting.

I would encourage the parents to seek the assistance of the Department of Education and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) with regard to the supports that are available for their child in a primary school setting.

### **Child Protection**

634. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integra-

tion and Youth if his attention has been drawn to the 2016 Concluding Observations Report for Ireland from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child; the steps that have been taken to implement these recommendations to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12593/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I would like to highlight that I consider the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to be a central point of reference for the work of my Department. As we have just embarked upon a new reporting cycle, I am cognisant of the importance of examining the implementation of the UN Convention with due consideration of the last Concluding Observations.

The State is obliged to submit regular reports to the Committee on the Rights of the Child (Committee) on measures to give effect to the rights under the UN Convention. Ireland’s last appearance before the Committee took place in Geneva, on 14 January 2016. Following this meeting, the Committee published its observations on Ireland’s progress and recommendations regarding further actions to be taken by the State. These take the form of the “Concluding Observations” referred to in your question.

The Concluding Observations were shared with all relevant Departments in 2016. Furthermore, my Department organised Ireland’s first Child Summit that year, where the Concluding Observations were discussed with experts, government officials and civil society stakeholders. I would also like to highlight that *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures - The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020* played an important role in progressing the Committee’s recommendations.

Under the old reporting system, the State’s response to the Concluding Observations was incorporated in its next periodic report and was followed by a reply to the list of issues developed by the Committee. However, the State decided to opt-in to the Simplified Reporting Procedure, which is promoted by the UN. Under the new system the State does not prepare an initial state report but its response to the list of issues constitutes the State’s party report. The report needs to take into consideration of the Committee’s recommendations put forward in 2016. The State received the list of issues in November 2020 and will have to submit its reply by October 2021. My department has already commenced engagement with other Departments and will also consult with civil society in relation to the State report.

I would like to reassure the Deputy that during the preparation of the State report consideration will be given to the last Concluding Observations.

### **Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries**

635. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will advise on queries raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12596/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** As part of its response to the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matters, the Government has committed to establishing an ex-gratia Restorative Recognition Scheme to provide financial recognition to specific groups. An Interdepartmental Group (IDG) has been established to develop detailed proposals to bring back to Government. This work must take account of the specific groups identified by the Commission of Investigation but is not limited to those groups. The IDG has held two meetings to date and will continue its work, including stakeholder consultation, throughout March

and April.

### **Registration of Births**

636. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if the review into incorrect birth registrations commissioned by his Department in May 2018 generated a report; and if so, when such a report will be published. [12630/21]

637. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the details regarding the independent review into incorrect birth registrations; if private nursing homes or persons were included in this review; the nature of the review process; if interviews were conducted; if testimony was audio compiled; and the status of any such testimony of audio files. [12631/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 636 and 637 together.

The review to which the deputy refers was commenced by my predecessor following Tusla’s discovery of evidence of illegal birth registrations in the files of the now defunct St. Patrick’s Guild Adoption Society.

This review was commissioned to investigate whether there is sufficient reliable evidence of that practice in the records of other adoption agencies and similar institutions. The then Minister appointed an Independent Reviewer to oversee a review of a sample of the files held by the Adoption Authority of Ireland (AAI) and Tusla. Interviews did not form part of the methodology of this review.

The Independent Reviewer worked with the AAI and Tusla to identify a sample of files to review to determine if they contain comparable evidence of illegal birth registrations. Records were selected from: adoption agencies; nursing homes which acted as ‘informal adoption agencies’; and boarding out services, selected geographically to provide national coverage.

The report of the Independent Reviewer (‘Sampling Review’) was submitted to the then Minister in May 2019. However publication was deferred to avoid encroaching on the work of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matters. A copy of the Sampling Review report was provided to the Commission.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Sampling Review report was published yesterday following cabinet approval. A copy of the report is available on my Department’s website.

### **Commissions of Inquiry**

638. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his views on the fact that the former United Nations Special Rapporteur on the sale of children and sexual exploitation of children, Ms Maud de Boer-Buquicchio, has twice called for a full-scale inquiry into the scale of forced and illegal adoptions that occurred in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12632/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The recently published report of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation makes it clear that unmarried mothers and their children lived in a hostile and uncaring environment in the period the report examined. As a result, many mothers effectively

had little to no choice other than to put their baby up for adoption.

I am conscious that the Commission reviewed a major body of documentary evidence in this regard and that additional records or documentation may simply not exist, to support an effective revisiting of this matter by way of a further Commission or statutory inquiry.

It is accepted by all parties that, in the past, adoption was often a secretive practice, carried out without due regard to the rights of those involved. Such practice in adoption reflects wider societal prejudices of the time.

Today, the safeguards in the adoption acts ensure that the best interests of the child are the paramount consideration in all adoption cases, and in every step of the process. Modern day adoption legislation and practice also ensures that the rights of all involved are vindicated, including birth fathers, within the overarching framework of working for the best interests of the child involved.

I am very conscious that every record on adoption represents the lives of a number of individuals. There are major ethical issues at play where the reality, identity and family and legal relationships that people have lived their whole lives may be fundamentally undermined. I am also concerned that the records may simply not exist, to effectively revisit adoptions that have taken place.

From listening to survivors I believe that what is most important as an immediate priority is access to birth certs and early life information for adoptees. Addressing this issue is a key part of the Government's Action Plan in response to the Commission's Report. It is a priority for myself, the Attorney and the Taoiseach.

My Department and I are engaging intensively with the Attorney General to find a solution to the issue of release of birth information, including birth certificates. Through this engagement with the Attorney, I am hopeful that we will have Heads of Bill by end March/ early April. This legislation, supported by a strong and supportive information and tracing service, should ensure that any individual with a question about their origins is empowered to access their own records and supported with regard to any related needs. *Question No. 639 answered with Question No. 630.*

### **Child and Family Agency**

**640. Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if a funding allocation will be made to a group (details supplied) for 2021; if a commitment will be given that Tusla will honour section 20 of the Tusla agreement pertaining to the dispute with a centre and ensure the present funding will not be altered prior to a final arbitration; his plans to retain this service for counties Carlow and Kilkenny; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12775/21]

**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 and has advised that it will continue to work with the organisation to which the Deputy refers to achieve a satisfactory outcome. 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.

### **Domestic Violence Policy**

641. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if Tusla has completed its strategic review of domestic violence accommodation provision which is intended to inform a plan for the future commissioning of domestic violence accommodation services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12776/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** The response to Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence (DSGBV) is a cross Departmental and multi-agency issue. Policy in this area is coordinated by the Department of Justice. Under the Child and Family Agency Act, 2013, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency has statutory responsibility for the care and protection of victims of DSGBV.

The Tusla review of emergency accommodation nationwide will assess the current and requisite distribution of safe emergency accommodation. The review's findings and the recommendations of the Monitoring Committee of the Second National Strategy on DSGBV will inform Tusla's future decisions on priority areas for investment and development of services.

Substantial progress has been made on a number of processes which contribute to the review. This includes a literature review, consultations with stakeholders, geographical and census data analysis, consultation with service users and policy analysis. Tusla has advised me that the report will be published in Quarter 2 this year.

It is of the utmost importance that the needs of those who experience domestic violence are met in the most appropriate way possible. I strongly support the work of Tusla and its funded service providers and I am committed to supporting the Agency in meeting the needs of individuals who experience domestic violence.

### **Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries**

642. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when a person (details supplied) will be provided with a copy of the Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12799/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** My officials are currently working through the large volume of requests received for hard copies of the Commission's final report.

I can confirm that the person whose details have been supplied by the Deputy will receive a copy of the report this week. It is likely that the report will have been delivered by the time the Deputy receives this reply.

## Parental Leave

643. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when the legislation will be progressed to provide the additional three weeks of parent's leave; if this change will come into effect in April 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12812/21]

**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.

## Childcare Services

644. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if an additional year of preschool can be arranged for a child (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12878/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme is a universal pre-school programme available to all children within the eligible age range.

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.

Exemptions for the age requirements for the ECCE programme provided by my Department are considered with regard to three guiding principles:

- That the child will be attending school or will be registered with Tusla as being educated in a place other than a recognised school by the time they turn 6.
- That a specialist has recommended the additional time in ECCE; and
- That the child has not already availed of the full two years of ECCE.

If the child referred to remained in ECCE for an additional year he would be over 6 years of age, therefore the application was not approved. It is important to note that the overage exemption cannot provide a waiver for the statutory obligations on parents with regard to educational provision when the child turns 6.

In deciding on applications for exemptions to the ECCE age requirements, my Department is guided by a review of the overage exemption process which was carried out by the National Disability Authority for my Department and the Department of Education in 2018. In their published report they concluded that it is in the best interest of children with additional needs to transition to primary school with their age cohort.

I would encourage the parents to seek the assistance of the Department of Education and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) with regard to the supports that are available

for their child in a primary school setting.

### **Departmental Internships**

645. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under his aegis in 2019; the cost in terms of wages and allowances; and the estimated numerical capacity of State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis. [12949/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** I wish to inform the Deputy that my officials have asked the agencies under the aegis of my Department to respond directly to you on this matter.

### **Parental Leave**

646. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when parents can expect to avail of the extension to parental leave; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13026/21]

**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 complete and the Family Leave Bill 2021 is intended to be introduced into Seanad Éireann on Friday 12th March. The aim is that this legislation will be enacted by the beginning of April 2021.

### **Childcare Services**

647. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the plans in place to reopen childcare and to enable providers to prepare for full reopening; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13043/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** In January, early learning and childcare services were restricted to children of essential workers and vulnerable children only, and the ECCE Programme was closed. As part of a careful and cautious reopening of priority sectors of society and the economy, these services will open for other groups of children throughout March on a phased basis.

The ECCE Programme resumed for all participating children from 8 March. Subject to public health advice, other restrictions on access to ELC/SAC services, will be lifted on 29 March so that all other children can return to services.

My Department remains committed to supporting services to operate safely. The current advice from the HSE is that no change is required to the Infection Prevention and Control guidance for services providing ELC during the pandemic. Services have been following this guidance effectively and it has helped to minimise risk of spread of infection within services. This

will be kept under review and the impact of the return of services and schools will be monitored closely over the coming weeks.

A package of funding measures are in place to support the phased reopening. From 8 March, there was a return to normal funding arrangements for Department schemes. A COVID-19 Operating Support Payment (COSP) introduced in February has been extended until 26 March for eligible services. This will help to offset loss of parental fees for services which are highly reliant on private income. Services will continue to be eligible for the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) at enhanced rates and are exempt from the turnover rule. The EWSS has been extended until the end of June.

In addition, a COVID-19 Impact Support has been introduced as part of the DCEDIY Sustainability Fund. Where a service has sustainability concerns as a result of the current restrictions, additional supports may be made available under this fund.

All measures taken in response to COVID-19 are under ongoing review by my Department, and should the public health advice change, our response will reflect that.

More information can be found at: <https://first5.gov.ie/guidance>

### **Child and Family Agency**

648. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will examine the case of a person (details supplied); if he will request that Tusla investigate the allegations and take appropriate action; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13044/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I wish to advise the Deputy that it would be inappropriate for me as Minister to comment on individual cases. I can confirm that the matter has been referred to Tusla, the Child and Family agency for appropriate attention. I have requested that Tusla provide the Deputy with confirmation that the matter is receiving attention. I have also requested that Tusla provide the Deputy with information on the management of retrospective allegations in a general sense.

### **Childcare Costs**

649. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his plans to provide heavily subsidised or free childcare (details supplied). [13046/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Among the range of commitments in the Programme for Government, addressing affordability in early learning and care and school-age childcare is a priority. Annual investment in early learning and childcare has increased by 141% since 2015. This funding has been directed towards improving accessibility, quality and affordability. It has, for example, funded a second year of the free pre-school programme and enabled the introduction of the National Childcare Scheme (NCS).

The Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) programme is a universal two-year pre-school programme available to all children within the eligible age range without cost to parents. The programme is provided for three hours per day, five days per week over 38 weeks per year and the programme year runs from September to June each year. Approximately 95% of children participate in the programme prior to commencing primary school.

The National Childcare Scheme was introduced in November 2019. It offers a statutory entitlement to financial support for childcare. It establishes an equitable and progressive system of universal and income-related subsidies for children up to the age of 15. The NCS derives from the Childcare Support Act 2018 which is the first piece of primary legislation passed in Ireland specifically relating to childcare. The Scheme aims to improve outcomes for children, reduce poverty, facilitate labour activation, and tangibly reduce the cost of childcare for tens of thousands of families.

NCS subsidies are awarded as an hourly rate for a maximum number of hours per week. The maximum number of subsidised hours available to families has increased from September 2020. Parents in work, study or training can now avail of up to 45 subsidised hours of childcare per week. Parents not in work, study or training can avail of up to 20 subsidised hours of childcare per week. The Scheme comprises two types of subsidies:

- **Universal Subsidy:** All families with children under 3 in registered childcare, or children who are over 3 and have not yet qualified for the free preschool (ECCE) programme, can apply. This subsidy is not means tested, and provides up to €20 per week, or €1,040 per year, off the cost of a registered childcare place.

- **Income Assessed:** Families with children aged between 24 weeks and 15 years who are attending registered childcare and who have a reckonable household income (NET) of less than €60,000 can apply for an Income Assessed subsidy. Subsidy rates are tailored based on individual circumstances, such as reckonable family income, child's age and their educational stage. The highest subsidy rate is €5.10 per hour for a baby living in a family with a household income of less than €26,000 per year, or €229 per week. The maximum subsidy for a school age child is €3.75 per hour per week.

More information on the NCS is available to parents by contacting the Parent Support Centre on 01 906 8530, Monday to Friday 9am-5pm, or on-line at [www.ncs.gov.ie](http://www.ncs.gov.ie).

First 5, the whole-of Government strategy for babies, young children and their families, has committed to a doubling of investment in early learning and childcare in the decade to 2028. In the context of this increased investment, a key project to address affordability is the development of a new funding model. An Expert Group is leading on this work.

Extensive research has already been commissioned to inform the Expert Group's work. The Research Partner, Frontier Economics, have so far produced and published five working papers, with three that directly address affordability issues entitled: "International Comparisons of Fees, Staff Wages and Public Investment in Early Learning and Care"; "International Approaches to Funding Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare to Reduce Costs for Parents"; and "Mechanisms to Control Fees Charged to Parents for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare". The research identifies international practice and learning that will be of value for the reform of the funding model in Ireland.

The recommendations of the Expert Group will be made in Autumn 2021 and will set out how the additional funding pledged in First 5 can deliver optimally for children, families and the State. Further information on the progress of this work, and the working papers published to date, can be found at [first5fundingmodel.gov.ie](http://first5fundingmodel.gov.ie).

## **Parental Leave**

650. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the status of and timeline regarding the introduction of the additional three

weeks of parental leave; when parents can expect to avail of this support; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13064/21]

**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 complete and the Family Leave Bill 2021 is intended to be introduced into Seanad Éireann on Friday 12th March. The aim is that this legislation will be enacted by the beginning of April 2021.

### **Adoption Authority of Ireland**

651. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if correspondence will be made available which was forwarded to his Department in 1996 by the Adoption Authority of Ireland after the Department inquired from adoption authorities if they had been made aware of or involved in cases of illegal birth registration. [13208/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I am interpreting the reference in the Deputy’s question to the “Adoption Authority” to mean the “Adoption Board” as the Adoption Authority was established in 2010 and the Adoption Board preceded it.

The correspondence referred to is not in files held by my Department, as responsibility for adoption matters previously rested with the Department of Health. That Department is currently engaged with my officials in relation to the transfer of historic files held by the Department of Health relating to a number of issues, including adoption, which are now within the remit of my Department. The correspondence should be included in these files. The COVID-19 Public Health Emergency is imposing additional complexities that make it extremely difficult to access physical files. As the Deputy will be aware, the Sampling Review into illegal birth registrations was published yesterday. I will ensure that this and any other relevant records and information will be taken into account in the context of considering next steps further to the publication of the review.

### **Domestic Violence Refuges Provision**

652. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if a list will be provided of all domestic violence refuge accommodation in Ireland by county; the capacity of each refuge in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13319/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Tusla, the Child and Family Agency has statutory responsibility for the care and protection of victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DGSBV). I have requested Tusla to respond to the Deputy directly on the information sought.

*Question No. 653 answered with Question No. 626.*

## **Direct Provision System**

654. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of direct provision centres that already offer own door or own room accommodation in their facilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13399/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** As the Deputy will be aware I have now published the White Paper on ending the ‘Direct Provision’ system of accommodation and support services. The White Paper sets out a new Government policy to establish a new International Protection Support Service which I envision will be fully operational by December 2024.

Currently there are 31 centres that can offer independent living with 12 of these centres providing own door accommodation.

As we transition to the new system, in order to meet our legal obligations to provide accommodation and other support services for protection applicants, existing accommodation centres will continue to operate in the short to medium term. However, in doing so the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) of my Department will focus on the provision of own-door accommodation and facilities to allow for independent living (access to cooking and laundry facilities and communal family areas outside bedrooms).

## **Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries**

655. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if a statutory or otherwise redress scheme will be put in place to provide compensation for those that spent time in mother and baby home institutions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13402/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** As part of its response to the findings and recommendations of the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matters, the Government has committed to establishing an ex-gratia Restorative Recognition Scheme. An Interdepartmental Group (IDG) has been set up to develop detailed proposals. The IDG has held two meetings to date and will consider the provision of financial recognition, as well as the provision of a form of enhanced medical card similar to that provided to former residents of Magdalene Laundries. The Commission of Investigation made recommendations in relation to those who might qualify for such schemes, however, the considerations of the IDG are not necessarily restricted to those identified by the Commission. *Question No. 656 answered with Question No. 626.*

## **Childcare Services**

657. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his attention has been drawn to a situation (details supplied); if this is happening in other playschools; the actions which can be taken for this family; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13437/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme is a universal free two-year pre-school programme available to all children within the eligible age range.

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A child must have reached 2 years and 8 months of age on or prior to 31 August of the relevant programme year to be eligible for the September start date and a child cannot turn 5 years and 6 months of age during the course of the ECCE programme year.

The Government decision to allow ECCE to resume, from March 08 is confined to children registered on the ECCE programme, vulnerable children or children of essential workers.

Subject to public health advice, other restrictions on access to early learning and childcare will be lifted on 29 March so that all other children can return to services.

This cautious and phased reopening schedule is essential as we work towards a safe resumption of all early learning and childcare services.

### **Third Level Education**

658. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the pandemic unemployment payment will be taken into consideration as income when assessing HEAR applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12484/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The HEAR scheme is operated by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) [www.iua.ie](http://www.iua.ie) who set the policy criteria for the scheme. Admissions under the HEAR scheme are regulated by the higher education institutions themselves. Applications to the scheme are submitted to the Central Applications Office (CAO) who coordinate the scheme for participating institutions.

As such, The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has no role in the policy criteria or operation of the scheme.

The HEAR handbook for 2021 can be accessed at [www.accesscollege.ie](http://www.accesscollege.ie). It confirms that applications to the HEAR scheme for 2021 are based on income from 2019 and therefore the pandemic unemployment payment is not a factor in this years applications.

### **Third Level Education**

659. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he is tracking the number of first year dropouts from third-level courses in the academic year 2020-2021; the consequences of this rate of dropout for the academic year 2021-2022; the CAO application process for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12501/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** My officials have spoken on a number of occasions with representatives from the higher education sector regarding any changes to the non-progression rate among students in this year. While precise figures on non-progression are not available at this time, the higher education institutions have indicated that there is no significant change either upwards or downwards in the non-progression rate this year compared to previous years. It is therefore not expected that CAO applications from this cohort will be significantly higher than in previous years.

Students who have decided not to progress with their higher education course and wish to

reapply to the CAO may do so in the normal way. While the initial CAO application date of 1st February has passed, the late application facility for the CAO opened on 5th March and will remain open until 1st May. Any potential applicant who has not already submitted a CAO application may do so now for any non-restricted course.

### **Nursing Education**

660. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to introduce a return of the service arrangement payment for those studying nursing to allow for a waiving of student fees in return for working in the HSE for a set period of time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12555/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** This is a matter for the Department of Health, who have advised that the deputy is referring to the sponsorship scheme available for support staff in the Irish public health service wishing to obtain a qualification in nursing or midwifery.

To be eligible, applicants must be directly involved in delivering care to patients or clients in a nursing context. For example, healthcare assistants and multi-task attendants are eligible for the sponsorship scheme. The number of sponsorships available each year is determined by the Office of the Nursing and Midwifery Services Director in the HSE. This scheme commenced in 2002 and 30 sponsorships have been awarded each year since 2017.

While in the scheme, the students retain their substantive posts. The students' basic salary is paid for the duration of their nursing or midwifery degree programme and they are expected to return to their post outside of the academic semesters for the duration of the programme.

After completing the degree programme, graduates must register as a nurse or midwife with the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland (NMBI). They are also asked to sign a service agreement and commit to work as a registered nurse or midwife in the Irish health services for a period of 5 years after registration.

Further information on the requirements and application process of the sponsorship scheme can be found on <https://healthservice.hse.ie/about-us/onmsd/cpd-for-nurses-and-midwives/onmsd-sponsorship-schemes/public-health-service-employees.html>

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

661. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the current plans for third-level institutions for September 2021, for example, if online learning will continue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12591/21]

663. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to see third-level students return to campus when it is safe to do so; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12609/21]

664. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the timeline for the return to campus for third-level students; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12610/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy**

**ty Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 661, 663 and 664 together.

Continuity for the most part of further and higher education and research has been maintained throughout the pandemic. In the early phase when on-site activities were suddenly suspended this was achieved through a rapid shift to emergency remote learning. Over time a blended model of learning has become the dominant mode with varying levels of onsite and online delivery aligned to public health advice and to the needs of different disciplines and different learner cohorts.

Level 5 measures designate higher and further education as essential insofar as onsite presence is required for education activities that cannot be held remotely. In January 2021, the sector rapidly adjusted again to the prevailing public health situation by moving the vast majority of their provision online.

COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 - The Path Ahead (published February 23) has not changed the status of Level 5 measures for adult and further and higher education. Using COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 - The Path Ahead and the Level 5 measures as a guide, higher and further Education should remain primarily online. Institutions and providers continue to carefully balance necessary onsite activities with prevailing public health advice, accepting that levels of time critical activity will fluctuate as the academic year and programmes progress.

It is important to provide, in so far as is feasible with an unpredictable public health situation, clear and hopeful messages to students and learners in relation to their expectations for the next academic year to inform their decision making. When the immediate challenges that the current restrictions are creating are mitigated there will be scope to begin planning for the new academic year and planning for a return to on-site learning. Careful consideration will be required to balance the benefits of providing clarity soon based on current assumptions versus maintaining flexibility to widen the scope for even greater levels of onsite provision, should the opportunity present itself in the autumn.

### **Third Level Admissions**

662. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will respond to concerns raised by a person (details supplied) in respect of CAO offers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12595/21]

665. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if a certain amount of college places can be held over in 2021-2022 for students who sat the leaving certificate in 2019 and who wish to pursue a nursing degree but had to defer going to college in 2020-2021 on health grounds; if his attention has been drawn to the difficulties that these students now face as a result of the predicted grades process and the increased points required for courses such as nursing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12612/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 662 and 665 together.

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are autonomous and manage their own academic affairs including admissions procedures. The CAO process applications for undergraduate courses on behalf of the HEIs. Decisions on admissions are made by the HEIs who then instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates. Therefore I do not have a role in the operation of the CAO.

The CAO system is a system that works on the assumption that grades obtained in the Leaving Certificate by candidates determine their points. It is on this basis that the CAO system allocates places to applicants including those from different years. To ensure impartiality, the automatic CAO points systems have been created in a way that does not allow for different treatment to be applied to different sub-groups.

There will be fluctuations in CAO points this year, as there are every year. The changes in points depend not only on the grades received by applicants but also on the number of applicants, and the number of places available. As we are in the midst of a global pandemic and economic flux, there is more volatility than usual this year due to factors such as reduced opportunities in the economy, students seeking to defer or re-apply in subsequent years and uncertainty around students travelling internationally both to and from Ireland.

I know how difficult a time it has been for students and parents, but I would like to stress the range of options available both in further education and training and apprenticeships, but also in pathways in higher education. Even for students whose path into higher education may not be what they originally planned, there may be a pathway back to their preferred option.

*Questions Nos. 663 and 664 answered with Question No. 661.*

*Question No. 665 answered with Question No. 662.*

### **Third Level Education**

**666. Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if there are plans to increase resources for research into virology on an ongoing basis; and if there will be an increase in funding for relevant college courses. [12746/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic we can all acknowledge the critical role that research, and in particular research into virology has played both at a national level and globally in enabling health systems and Governments to respond effectively and in a timely manner to the significant challenges posed by the virus. We have drawn upon expertise and investment in research that stretches back many years to respond to the crisis that we face today.

A key part of my portfolio is Research, Innovation and Science and it is my ambition to develop a new national Strategy for Research and Innovation and to strengthen the capability and capacity of our research and innovation system to deliver excellence and impact which will make a real difference to the lives of all our citizens, whether it be through breakthrough health discoveries, addressing climate challenges or creating new jobs for the knowledge economy.

While we are still reeling from Covid-19, one of the dividends has to be increased investment in science and research. My Department will continue to engage with the Higher Education Authority and Higher Education Institutions about ensuring we continue to invest in educating the next generation of scientist and researchers.

### **Brexit Issues**

**667. Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if Irish students who have been accepted onto master's degree courses in the UK pre-Brexit and deferred their place for an academic year due to Covid-19 will

be exempt from international student fees and will be expected to pay the usual EU fees and qualify for student loans on the basis of same due to the CTA; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12792/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Irish students in UK colleges are treated as home students, in terms of paying fees at home rates in the UK. Unlike students from the rest of the EU, Irish students will not be charged fees at the international rate. Therefore, should they pursue their higher education studies in the UK, fees will be in line with the normal fees paid by UK nationals. The Common Travel Area arrangements apply for Undergraduate and Postgraduate programmes in the UK.

Students seeking to pursue their studies in the UK are advised to contact the Student Finance agency in each of the Devolved Administration in the UK, as each jurisdiction may have variations in eligibility criteria. Students may also wish to contact the relevant Higher Education Institution in the UK for advice on the type and range of supports that may be available in any specific college.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

668. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the status of the engagement process with social and healthcare course providers and regulatory bodies on the challenges for students required to undertake placements during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12798/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I am aware that issues have arisen in relation to placement hours both for students of Social Care programmes and for placements more generally as the restrictions to combat the spread of Covid-19 have tightened. My Department is monitoring developments in this regard very closely.

From the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, significant work has been undertaken by a stakeholder group chaired by the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and including the representative bodies of education providers and students to address issues relating to the maintenance of the quality and standards of:

- teaching and learning,
- assessment, and
- qualifications.

This group has focused on the implementation of alternative arrangements and methods of delivery, where appropriate and necessary, to meet both these standards and, where applicable, the educational accreditation criteria established by Professional Recognition Bodies (PRBs).

In the case of Social Care, the awards standards in place for these qualifications reflect the accreditation criteria and placement requirements that have been set out by CORU, Ireland's multi-profession Health and Social Care Regulator and consequently the relevant PRB for this profession.

Since March 2020, QQI has facilitated engagement between members of the stakeholders group and CORU which have taken place in parallel to direct engagements between CORU and individual education providers at a local and regional level. The goal of these engagements has

been to ensure that, where possible, necessary alternative arrangements are in place to maintain the standards of education and training in this area and that these issues are actively managed. These efforts are to ensure that students can progress in their programmes from one academic year into the next, or, where relevant, graduate with the necessary professional competencies that have been set out by CORU.

While I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the efforts that have been made by CORU, QQI and our educational institutions to identify and implement flexible solutions for students up to this point, I am conscious that further efforts are now necessary.

The current timing and the likely duration of Covid restrictions has created even greater disruption and uncertainty in this space than anticipated and has substantially impacted on the expected level of available social care placements. It is in this context that QQI has been asked, supported by my Department, to facilitate intensified engagements between CORU, education providers and relevant stakeholders on this issue. These engagements are ongoing and are focused on identifying solutions that can be swiftly implemented for the student cohort who are most impacted in the near term while also identifying flexible approaches that can be readily adopted within the system in the medium to longer term as the response to the pandemic evolves and changes. These engagements serve to facilitate dialogue among stakeholders in developing these solutions and, most importantly, will ensure transparency and clarity for those students studying social care.

Students should continue to engage directly with their provider for further information on the arrangements being implemented for their particular year and course.

### **Third Level Education**

669. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the work he is undertaking with third-level institutions to develop accredited learning courses for college students with a diagnosis of autism and moderate intellectual disability; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13571/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** My Department is working to deliver on its mission to develop further and higher education to support people in reaching their full potential. We published our Statement of Strategy for the 2021-2023 period on March 8. It contains six strategic goals including a goal on inclusion which seeks to “support learning for all, recognising the needs of vulnerable learners and the most marginalised, and assist people in access to and progression through higher and further education and training, so as to grow prosperity across communities and build social cohesion.”

Fostering Inclusion is one of the three core pillars around which the Further Education and Training Strategy 2020-2024 is built. The Further Education and Training (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, including those with a disability. FET programmes are available to all learners, including those with an intellectual disability, who meet the eligibility criteria and the guidelines provided for each FET programme.

Specialist Training Provision (STP) is also available for learners with more complex support needs, and this provision addresses the identified training needs of people with disabilities who are experiencing exclusion and labour market disadvantage in the form of vocational training

programmes. Community Education assists learners with a disability to participate in FET provision by adapting course content, resources and teaching methodologies to suit their abilities.

FET providers are required to offer reasonable accommodations to learners with disabilities, the nature of these accommodations varies depending on the identified needs of individual learners. FET provision is available across the country in every county. Most of these programmes are either free of charge or heavily subsidised. Details of FET courses are available at [www.fetchcourses.ie](http://www.fetchcourses.ie) or through the Adult Education Guidance Service in the learner's local ETB. This service is free of charge and open to anyone over the age of 18. Local ETBs can provide advice on all education and training options, as well as additional supports that are available to learners, including for learners with a disability.

SOLAS, the national Further Education and Training authority is currently overseeing an independent evaluation of SPT. The purpose of the evaluation is to examine the quality, effectiveness, on-going relevance and overall value of vocational training that is currently delivered by specialist training providers, and to propose any recommendations for future practice.

Students who meet eligibility criteria and are attending approved courses can access supports such as the SUSI grant scheme. The Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) is the principal funding source for students with disabilities in further and higher education. The fund is available to students with disabilities, including Autism, attending both further and higher education courses. Students attending approved courses in Northern Ireland, the UK, and the EU are also eligible for support. The purpose of the FSD is to provide students with a disability with the necessary assistance to enable them to access, fully participate in and successfully complete their chosen course of study.

I recently approved a number of initiatives under the FSD aimed at supporting students with disabilities to access and engage with higher education. The initiatives, which involve 23 higher education institutions (HEI) and €5.4m in expenditure, are broad and are aimed at improving access to higher education for people with a disability, to improving college campuses and to assist staff with training and development. Among the projects are a number of projects for students with autism including the establishment of autism friendly rooms across nine different campuses, the development of assistive technology including for students with disabilities, an app to help students with visual or hearing impairment navigate their way around campus and specialist assistance for students who are deaf.

One of my priorities is to support learning for all. I want the tertiary education system to develop and grow its supports for vulnerable learners, learners with disabilities, under-represented groups and the most marginalised. I want learners to engage with and complete their education journey while recognising that some learners will need additional supports to help them achieve their full potential.

My Department will continue to keep existing provision and initiatives under review; to develop a better understanding of what works best within the different models, how we can support different providers in working together and learning from each other, and examining what is scalable from institutional-level approaches.

### **Student Universal Support Ireland**

670. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will consider allowing first year college students who have particularly struggled during the pandemic to be permitted to repeat first year while retaining all

SUSI grants; if he will acknowledge that some students have struggled with having to conduct their entire first year online and have been impacted negatively in terms of mental health and academic achievement; if he will examine the way in which students that are reliant on SUSI grants will be accommodated to repeat first year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12855/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Under the student grant scheme, a student must be progressing to retain their student grant.

The legislation does not allow for a grant to be paid to a student for a repeat period of study on the same course, or for a different course at the same level, irrespective of whether or not a grant was paid previously.

Once an equivalent period of study has been completed on the new course, the student may be eligible for student grant assistance for the remainder of the course.

However, it is important to stress under Article 15(8) of the Student Grant Scheme 2020, the awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) has discretion to award a grant for a repeat period of study in exceptional circumstances which impacted on a student completing a particular period of study or undertaking exams in line with guidelines drawn up by the Minister.

SUSI treats each application for repeat funding on a case-by-case basis, and it is a matter for the individual student to demonstrate to the satisfaction of the awarding authority that there were exceptional circumstances.

Apart from the Student Grant Scheme, the Deputy will be aware of the €168m funding package of for the return to education. This package includes a €10m access support package for higher education students. I have approved the allocation of €8.1m of this funding to top up the Student Assistance Fund (SAF). The SAF assists students in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Institutions have the autonomy to maximise the flexibility in the Student Assistance Fund to enable HEIs to support students during the COVID-19 situation. Details of this fund are available from the Access Office in the third level institution attended. This fund is administered on a confidential, discretionary basis.

### **English Language Training Organisations**

671. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to concerns raised by a group (details supplied) in relation to English language education here; the supports that have been made available to the group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12865/21]

672. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if specific supports will be introduced to assist the English language sector in Ireland considering that this sector is wholly dependent on international travel and has no domestic demand to depend on; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12898/21]

684. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps his Department is taking to support language schools given the dependence of the industry on international tourism for the uptake of classes; and if

he will make a statement on the matter. [13477/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 671, 672 and 684 together.

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 sectorial 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/>.

### **Departmental Internships**

673. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under his aegis in 2019; the cost in terms of wages and allowances; and the estimated numerical capacity of State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis. [12956/21]

**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 non commercial state bodies under the remit of my Department, in regard to work experience and internships, is not routinely compiled by my Department.

The state bodies may be contacted directly by e-mail by the members of the Oireachtas as set out in the attached document.

**Contact E-Mail Addresses for State Bodies under the Remit of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science**

Name of Body	Dedicated Email address for the Members of the Oireachtas	Designated Official Responsible for assisting Oireachtas Members
Higher Education Authority	Oireachtas@hea.ie	Padraic Mellett*
Irish Research Council( Note 1)	Oireachtas@research.ie	Padraic Mellett*
Grangegorman Development Agency	Communications@ggda.ie	nora.rahill@ggda.ie
SOLAS	oireachtasinfo@solas.ie	Nikki Gallagher
Skillnets Ltd	oireachtas@skillnets.com	t.donnery@skillnets.com
Quality and Qualifications Ireland	ceo@qqi.ie	ceo@qqi.ie
Léargas – The Exchange Bureau	oireachtas@leargas.ie	fbroughan@leargas.ie
Science Foundation Ireland	ciara.cotter@sfi.ie	Ciara Cotter

Note 1 – In regard to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and the Irish Research Council (IRC) as the IRC operates under the auspices of the HEA. Mr Mellett will address Oireachtas queries for both the HEA and IRC. Please use Oireachtas@hea.ie and Oireachtas@research.ie respectively to contact Mr Mellett.

**Covid-19 Pandemic**

674. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if measures will be put in place to give regard to the arrangements for those preparing for their final apprenticeship exams in view of the Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13027/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** The COVID-19 related suspension of face to face training for apprentices in Training Centres, IoTs and Technological Universities has had a significant impact on craft apprenticeship off-the-job training. When permissible, on-site practical training is also operating at approximately 50% normal capacity to ensure adherence to public health guidance.

Since January 11th training facilities have again been closed however theoretical training aspects of the craft apprenticeship courses have been delivered online for apprentices who are due to attend off-the-job training during this period. Intensive work is underway to agree a phased basis return to onsite training for apprentices who have had their training interrupted or who were close to assessment before the January shutdown. A small number of Phase 2 apprentices returned to Training Centres on the 1st March and apprenticeship stakeholders are continuing to engage on plans for a limited return of Phase 4 and 6 apprentices.

SOLAS is providing weekly updates directly to apprentices, and employers of apprentices, who are currently assigned to off the job training phases.

In addition to the urgent work on returning apprentices to onsite training, SOLAS and the HEA are exploring the development of additional training capacity across education and training providers with the objective of tackling the waiting lists and ensuring that apprentices complete their training as quickly as possible.

**Third Level Education**

675. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Re-

search, Innovation and Science if the requirement for students embarking on paramedic studies degrees in the 2021-2022 academic year to have a grade C1 licence by the end of year 1 will be reviewed in view of the delays to driver test appointments at present and the knock-on delays that are expected. [13143/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Higher Education Institutions are autonomous within the meaning of the Universities Act 1997, the Institutions of Technology Acts 1992 to 2006 and the Technological Universities Act 2018. Under this legislation the institutions are academically independent and are entitled to regulate their own academic affairs, including in relation to requirements to progress from one year to the next. It is not within my remit to intervene in such matters.

It is my understanding that in previous years applicants to this course were required to have their full C1 license prior to entering the course, and that the requirement to have their license by the end of year 1 constitutes an allowance in light of the restricted test appointments available at the moment. If, when we are nearing the end of the 2021/2022 academic year, students have been unable to gain an opportunity to pass their drivers test I would encourage them to engage with their course co-ordinator in order to ascertain what options are available to them.

### SOLAS Administration

676. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the provisions being put in place to move the Safepass training course online; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13191/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Construction) Regulations 2013, craft and general construction workers, persons undertaking on-site security work and persons or classes of persons as may be prescribed by the Minister are required to hold a safety awareness registration card (Safe Pass card).

In March 2020 the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation amended these regulations to extend the expiry dates of valid Safe Pass cards due to expire after the 1st March 2020 for the duration of the Covid-19 emergency period. General provision of face to face Safe Pass courses is currently suspended for the second time in two years with the shutdown of the general construction sector in January.

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.

While general provision of face to face training has been temporarily suspended, given the continuation of essential construction activity, provision of Safe Pass training may take place to meet the needs of new workers accessing critical projects under certain specific conditions as follows:-

1. Training providers must inform SOLAS in advance of their plans to run a course and demonstrate the immediate requirement for the training.
2. SOLAS will approve the running of Safe Pass courses on a case by case basis based on training being limited to (1) workers engaged in essential construction work and (2) those not currently holding valid cards.

3. Any permitted training activity should be in accordance with the COVID-19 safety arrangements developed by SOLAS.

### **Third Level Fees**

677. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on a situation in National University of Ireland Galway in which a student fails to pay the student levy fee of €224 by 31 December 2020 in any given academic year, the fee is automatically doubled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13209/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are governed by the Universities Act 1997, the Institutes of Technologies Acts 1992 to 2006 and the Technological Universities Act 2018. Within the meaning of these Acts, HEIs are autonomous bodies and are responsible for their own day-to-day management and operational affairs including dealing with policy and procedure in relation to fee collection. My Department therefore has no role in relation to such matters.

However, I am very aware of the difficulties facing students during this pandemic. In general there is a real requirement in these exceptional times to have a responsive approach to student needs wherever possible and it is important to acknowledge that HEIs have to date shown enormous willingness to be responsive in numerous ways. I would encourage all students to engage with their institution to discuss any issues in relation to their course, including fees.

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 will be provided in academic year 2020/21 to all students who avail of SUSI grants and to all EU full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students attending publicly funded Higher Education Institutions in the state.

Under this initiative students who avail of the SUSI grant will receive 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.

Students experiencing exceptional financial need can apply for support under the Student Assistance Fund. This Fund assists students, in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Information on the fund is available through the Access Office of the institution attended. The fund is administered on a confidential, discretionary basis.

### **Student Universal Support Ireland**

678. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science further to Parliamentary Question No. 671 of 24 February 2021,

if SUSI is seeking repayment from the 743 students that were initially awarded SUSI grants but subsequently had the grants withdrawn upon review. [13210/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** SUSI is not seeking a repayment from all 743 students who were initially awarded a grant but since had their grant withdrawn. Some students did not receive a payment from SUSI before their grant was withdrawn and in such cases, no repayment is sought.

No repayment is sought from students who were initially eligible to receive a payment but subsequently became ineligible for funding, due to, for example, a change in course or college.

However in some cases, students received a payment before their grant was withdrawn and repayment is sought where the student is not eligible to receive the payment. SUSI operates in line with legislation as outlined in the Student Support Act 2011 and subsequent annual schemes and is obliged under this legislation to seek repayments.

### Student Accommodation

679. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his Department requested all IT colleges to suspend the collection of rental income from businesses on their campuses during the public health emergency and while the campuses are closed. [13213/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The position is that Technological Universities and Institutes of Technology are autonomous institutions within the meaning of the Technological Universities Act 2018 and the Institutes of Technology Acts 1992 to 2006.

Under the terms of these Acts, the governance and day-to-day management of these institutions are matters for which the Governing Bodies and the management of the relevant institutions are responsible.

The collection of rental income by these institutions from businesses on their campuses is a matter for each institution.

### Third Level Admissions

680. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of students that accept a place to study medicine each year through the CAO system since 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13218/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The attached spreadsheet contains a breakdown of the number of enrolments in year one of the honours degree medicine courses by year and by institution from 2007/08 to 2019/20.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-10\_pq680-10-03-21\_en.xlsx">Medicine Enrolments</a>]

### Apprenticeship Programmes

681. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the location in which guidance counsellors can access information on apprenticeship vacancies. [13375/21]

682. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the plans to develop a portal for prospective apprentices to explore apprenticeship vacancies. [13376/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 681 and 682 together.

The Apprenticeship Jobs Portal ([www.apprenticeshipjobs.ie](http://www.apprenticeshipjobs.ie)) was launched in April 2019 to enhance the visibility and accessibility of apprenticeship job vacancies, and to assist small companies to advertise apprenticeship jobs to a wide audience. The platform is building traction month-on-month, with 1,264 employers now registered on the site and 255 job vacancies posted since its launch. Work is continuing to bring all apprentice employers on-board the system. Prospective apprentices may also contact their local ETB who may hold information on local apprenticeship vacancies.

In addition, communication on developments in the Generation Apprenticeship (GA) promotional campaign, such as the GA schools competition, has been sent to the Institute of Guidance Counsellors to share with the Institute's members.

As the Deputy may be aware, the Department also launched a one-stop shop – The Right Course – outlining all of the education and training options available for people.

### **Student Universal Support Ireland**

683. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the way in which the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, will be assessed by SUSI for the coming academic year in relation to third-level students; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13432/21]

**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 Pandemic 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.

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](http://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.

A review of the Student Grant Scheme in 2020 (following the impact of COVID-19) was committed to as part of the Programme for Government. This Review is currently being undertaken. It will document the impact of Covid-19 on the Scheme and outline a number of recommendations for consideration by the end of Quarter 1, 2021.

Apart from the Student Grant Scheme, the Deputy will be aware of the €168m funding package of for the return to education. This package includes a €10m access support package for higher education students. I have approved the allocation of €8.1m of this funding to top up the Student Assistance Fund (SAF). The SAF assists students in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Institutions have the autonomy to maximise the flexibility in the Student Assistance Fund to enable HEIs to support students during the COVID-19 situation. Details of this fund are available from the Access Office in the third level institution attended. This fund is administered on a confidential, discretionary basis.

*Question No. 684 answered with Question No. 671.*

### **Departmental Advertising**

685. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the amount spent across his Department on advertising in relation to Covid-19 by month and by media outlet (details supplied) from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021. [13560/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** My Department has had no expenditure on advertising in relation to COVID-19 across the platforms referred to.

### **Naturalisation Applications**

686. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Justice the status of an application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12488/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** An application for a certificate of natu-

ralisation was received from the person referred to by the Deputy on 16 July 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.

### **Legal Aid**

687. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Justice the value of criminal legal aid claimed by county under each of the various criminal legal aid schemes in each of the years 2018 to 2020, in tabular form. [12559/21]

688. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons that were granted criminal legal aid by county under each of the various criminal legal aid schemes in each of the years 2018 to 2020, in tabular form. [12560/21]

689. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Justice the amount of legal aid paid to each supplier (details supplied) under each of the various criminal legal aid schemes in each of the years 2018 to 2020, in tabular form. [12561/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 687, 688 and 689 together.

The Criminal Justice (Legal Aid) Act, 1962, which is the primary legislation covering the operation of the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme, provides that free legal aid may be granted, in certain circumstances, for the defence of persons of insufficient means in criminal proceedings.

Under the Scheme, the courts, through the judiciary, are responsible for the granting of legal aid. An applicant for legal aid must establish to the satisfaction of the court that their means are insufficient to enable them to pay for legal aid themselves. The 1962 Act specifies that the court must also be satisfied that, by reason of the "gravity of the charge" or "exceptional circumstances", it is essential in the interests of justice that the applicant should have legal aid. Criminal prosecutions originate in the District Court and if so satisfied, the Judge will grant a criminal legal aid certificate.

It is not possible to provide the value of criminal legal aid by county under the Criminal

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Legal Aid Scheme for each of the years 2018 to 2020. This information is not readily available and could not be compiled without disproportionate use of staff resources.

Expenditure on the main Criminal Legal Aid Scheme for each of the years 2018 to 2020 was as follows:

Year	Expenditure
2018	€62.5million
2019	€62.9 million
2020	€61.7 million

The amount of legal aid paid to Solicitors, Junior Counsel and Senior Counsel under the main Criminal Legal Aid Scheme for each of years 2018 to 2020 was as follows:

Year	Expenditure Solicitors	Expenditure Junior Counsel	Expenditure Senior Counsel
2018	€35,061,481	€13,140,588	€11,433,767
2019	€36,652,929	€13,900,466	€9,787,599
2020	€34,217,662	€13,829,488	€9,408,319

As indicated, criminal prosecutions originate in the District Court and if so satisfied, the Judge will grant a criminal legal aid certificate. Figures are not kept in such a way as to be able to provide a breakdown by county of the number of certificates granted for criminal legal aid or of individuals who were granted criminal legal aid. The Courts Service has informed my Department that the number of legal aid certificates granted in the District Court in each of the years 2018 to 2020 was as follows:

Year	2018	2019	2020
Number of criminal legal aid certificates granted in the District Court	72,674	79,346	73,611

#### **Criminal Assets Bureau Legal Aid Scheme (CAB)**

The CAB Scheme, which came into effect from 2 April 1998, is applicable to persons who are respondents and/or defendants in any court proceedings brought by, or in the name of, the Criminal Assets Bureau, including court proceedings under the Proceeds of Crime Act, 1996, the Revenue Acts or the Social Welfare Acts and applications made by the Director of Public Prosecutions under Section 39 of the Criminal Justice Act 1994. The responsibility for the administration of the Scheme was transferred from my Department to the Legal Aid Board on 1 January 2014. Expenditure in each of the years 2018 to 2020 was as follows:

Year	Expenditure
2018	€147,203
2019	€42,498
2020	€69,373

#### **Garda Station Legal Advice Revised Scheme**

The Garda Station Legal Advice Scheme came into effect in 2001. It provides that where a person is detained in a Garda Station for the purpose of the investigation of an offence and s/he has a legal entitlement to consult with a solicitor and the person's means are insufficient to enable him/her to pay for such consultation, that consultations with solicitors will be paid for by the State. The Scheme, now known as the Garda Station Legal Advice Revised Scheme, was extended in May 2014 to include attendance of a solicitor at a formal interview between the Gardaí and the detainee. The responsibility for the administration of the Scheme was transferred from my Department to the Legal Aid Board on 1 October 2011. Expenditure in each of the years 2018 to 2020 was as follows:

Year	Expenditure
2018	€1,947,869
2019	€1,714,245
2020	€1,980,621

#### **District Court Counsel Scheme**

The Scheme was introduced in October 2009 following a Supreme Court decision to allow a judge to assign counsel in the District Court to a defendant because of the gravity of the charge and complexity of the case, as well as any other exceptional circumstances.

Following a High Court Judicial Review case in 2016, the Scheme was revised to allow a Circuit Court Judge grant legal aid in respect of a District Court Appeal.

Expenditure under the District Court Counsel Scheme was as follows:

Year	Expenditure
2018	€261,606
2019	€452,445
2020	€518,601

#### **The Legal Aid - Custody Issues Scheme (formerly known as the Attorney General's Legal Aid Scheme)**

The Legal Aid - Custody Issues Scheme provides payment for legal representation in the High Court and the Supreme Court for certain types of cases not covered by civil legal aid or the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme. The cases covered include Habeas Corpus (Article 40.4.2) Applications, High / Supreme Court Bail Motions, certain types of Judicial Review, Extradition and European Arrest Warrant Applications.

The Scheme was previously administered on behalf of the Attorney General by my Department. From 1st June 2012 the remit for the administration of the Scheme was transferred to the Legal Aid Board.

The expenditure under the Scheme in each of the years 2018 to 2020 was as follows:

Year	Expenditure
2018	€2,675,505
2019	€3,201,235
2020	€4,256,682

### **Legal Aid**

690. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Justice the funding provided for free legal advice for applicants through the Legal Aid Board's refugee legal service as provided for in the International Protection Act 2015 in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12590/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Legal Aid Board is the statutory body responsible for the provision of civil legal aid and advice to persons of modest means in the State, in accordance with the provisions of the Civil Legal Aid Act 1995 and the Civil Legal Aid Regulations 1996 to 2017.

Section 3(3) of the Act provides that the Board shall, subject to the provisions of the Act,

be independent in the exercise of its functions. However, to be of assistance to the Deputy I have had enquiries made with the Legal Aid Board on foot of which the following information is provided.

Civil legal aid and advice is provided primarily through a network of law centres by solicitors employed by the Legal Aid Board. There are 30 full time and 12 part-time law centres. Arising from the enactment of the International Protection Act 2015, the Legal Aid Board integrated the Refugee Legal Service into its main law centre network. Specific law centres in Dublin, Cork and Galway currently include an international protection speciality. International protection is one of many services provided by those law centres. The Legal Aid Board also engages private solicitors to provide services in international protection cases. A substantial portion of the Board's international protection cases are handled by private practitioners.

With the introduction of the single application procedure following the enactment of the International Protection Act 2015, the Board established and maintains a panel of solicitors who are willing to provide services to persons who have been granted legal services for the purpose of: advice and/or representation in relation to an application under the International Protection Act 2015 for asylum, subsidiary protection and permission to remain; and for all relevant matters covered by the International Protection Act 2015, the Refugee Act 1996 and the Immigration Act 1999.

Since 2017, referrals to private solicitors have occurred at the outset of the International Protection process to ensure applicants receive legal advice at the earliest stage. Prior to the commencement of the Act, referrals more typically took place at the appeals stage.

The following table shows the case expenditure (not including pay or operational costs) in relation to the provision of legal aid and advice in the area of international protection, as provided by the Legal Aid Board.

**Table 1**

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Jan 2021
Non-Pay Expenditure	€75,356	€552,787	€1,050,035	€1,582,789	€1,243,907	€55,254

The Legal Aid Board is included in the review being undertaken to identify how processing and general supports to applicants in the International Protection process can be enhanced. They will be engaging with my Department to guide future funding considerations as set out in the recent White Paper to End Direct Provision and to establish a new International Protection Support Service.

In Budget 2021, I provided an increased provision of over €2 million for the Legal Aid Board bringing its total funding to €44.6 million for this year, a 6% increase. This will enable the Board to recruit additional staff and meet other costs to enhance delivery of all of its services across the country.

## Crime Prevention

691. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice her plans to combat the rise in crime in the north inner city area of Dublin; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12657/21]

692. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice her plans in relation to combating the rise in crime in the north inner city of Dublin; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12661/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 691 and 692 together.

As the Deputy will be aware, tackling crime in our communities is a priority for this government and for An Garda Síochána. As part of Budget 2021, the government has provided a record €1.952 billion to an Garda Síochána in their efforts to tackle crime and to build community resilience against crime.

The Deputy may also be aware that I recently met with the Garda Commissioner where we discussed, amongst other topics, violent crime in the inner city of Dublin. An Garda Síochána has a comprehensive policing plan in place in the north inner city which will see high visibility patrols carried out on a daily basis, with a particular focus on areas where public order and related offending has recently taken place.

In respect of drug related crime, the Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau (GNDOCB) is having significant success in disrupting drug trafficking and the supply of illicit drugs by organised crime groups. Its work is supported by Divisional Drugs Units nationwide, and by all Gardaí working in local communities including in Dublin. It also works closely and productively with international law enforcement partners.

The Government has in place the National Drugs Strategy, “*Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery - a health led response to drug and alcohol use in Ireland 2017-2025* “. The Strategy is unique among national drugs strategies across EU Member States in recognising the need to address drug-related debt intimidation at a community level.

The Strategy includes an action which specifically relates to strengthening the effectiveness of the Drug-Related Intimidation Reporting Programme. The programme, which was developed by An Garda Síochána in partnership with the National Family Support Network (NFSN) to respond to the needs of drug users and family members who may be subject to the threat of drug related intimidation, has been implemented on a national level since 2013.

I am informed that funding in Dublin Metropolitan Region (DMR), North Central Division for Garda Youth Diversion Projects and activities has increased from €566,236 in 2018 to an allocation of €1.2m in 2021. Alongside this increase in funding, the currently funded projects are being provided with increased staffing and support to increase their catchment areas to cover the majority of the DMR, North Central area. This is part of the overall objective of my Department to increase and develop the Garda Youth Diversion Project (GYDP) network to ensure access to all young people that need the service nationally.

The Deputy will also be aware that the issue of youth crime is addressed in the draft Youth Justice Strategy 2020-2026, which I intend to finalise and bring to Government shortly. This will consider the full range of issues connected to children and young people at risk of coming into contact with the criminal justice system. This will include early intervention and preventative work, family support and diversion from crime, through to court processes and facilities, supervision of offenders, detention and reintegration and support post release.

Minister of State James Browne has also established a special expert forum on antisocial behaviour, which will consider the effectiveness of existing legislation and propose new ways forward, including new powers for An Garda Síochána and additional interventions to support parenting of offenders.

It is worth noting that the North Inner City Electoral Area is one of three locations (along with Waterford and Longford) due to pilot the Department’s new Local Community Safety Partnership approach.

The Partnerships will bring together residents, community representatives, business interests, councillors, local authorities and State services such as An Garda Síochána, Tusla and the HSE to devise and implement the Local Community Safety Plans. This approach is aimed at bringing all of the key services together with the communities they serve to jointly identify and tackle the problems facing their particular area. A community – such as the North Inner City – often has a range of resources available and the Partnership can act as a means to bring those resources together, and identify and address gaps where necessary. Cormac Ó Donnchú was recently appointed Chair to the Dublin North Inner City partnership. A process of community engagement will commence this month with a view to having the partnership established in April.

### Visa Applications

693. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Justice if the visa process for medical professionals who have job offers in health settings here and who are engaging with the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service can be expedited given the serious need for medical staff nationally. [12669/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The strong advice is that everyone, regardless of their nationality or visa/preclearance status, or where they started their travel from, who cannot provide proof of an essential purpose to travel to or within Ireland, should not travel to Ireland.

In support of the ongoing travel restrictions, effective from close of business on 29 January 2021, my Department has taken the decision to temporarily cease accepting new visa/preclearance applications. However we continue to accept Priority/Emergency categories. Visa applications for medical professionals with job offers do meet the criteria for an Emergency application and are currently being processed on an expedited basis. Processing times for these applications can vary due to the complexity of the individual application. However, every effort is being made to issue a decision on each application as soon as possible.

### Garda Data

694. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of prosecutions An Garda Síochána has proceeded with for offences under section 17(3) of the Intoxicating Liquor Act 2003 in each of the years of 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [12698/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Deputy will be aware that section 17(3) of the Intoxicating Liquor Act 2003 provides for an offence for a licensee, with intent to evade the conditions of the licence, to take intoxicating liquor from the licensed premises for the purpose of its being sold on the account or for the benefit or profit of the licensee, or to permit any other person to do so. The penalty on conviction is a fine of up to €1,500 for a first offence and up to €2,000 for a second or subsequent offence.

I am advised by the Garda authorities that, following a review of available data, no prosecutions have been entered against licensed premises for offences under section 17(3) of the Intoxicating Liquor Act 2003 in 2018 to 2020 or to-date in 2021.

### Garda Strength

695. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of full-time youth justice workers, family support and early intervention posts that are employed for each of the Garda youth division projects in the Dublin north Garda division in tabular form. [12699/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy James Browne) :** The Deputy may be interested to know that there are currently 105 Garda Youth Diversion Projects (GYDPs) nationwide. The intention is to further develop this service so that it is available to every child in the State who could benefit from it, through an ongoing expansion of existing services and the foundation of new projects where necessary.

The table below outlines the number of persons employed for each of the GYPDs in the DMR North Garda Division.

Project	Location	Youth Justice Workers	Family Support Workers	Total per project
North Fingal (Balbriggan)	Balbriggan	4	1	5
BYB	Ballymun	3	1	4
Donnycarney	Santry	2	0	2
Jets	Coolock	2	0	2
Keep	Coolock	3	1	4
North Bay	Balbriggan	2	0	2
Woodale	Coolock	3	0	3
	Total	19	3	22

My Department is supporting the ongoing development of practice in Garda Youth Diversion Projects through the Action Research Project led by the University of Limerick. The Action Research Project works directly with front-line Youth Justice Workers from local projects to develop interventions and best practice. Based on initial outcomes from the Action Research Project, and evaluations of a number of pilot projects, it is intended to develop proposals to expand the existing services. This would ensure national coverage and a stronger focus on difficult issues such as the hard-to-reach cohort.

As part of this work, family support workers and early intervention workers have been provided to a limited number of GYDPs on a pilot basis. In such instances, projects were asked to express a preference as to whether they would prefer to participate in the family support or early intervention pilot.

It is intended that these interventions will be expanded in the new Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2026, which I intend to finalise and which will be brought to Government shortly.

### Garda Transport Provision

696. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if a recent contract for the supply of new Garda public order unit vans went out to tender; and if so, when the new vans will come into the fleet. [12700/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** In accordance with the Garda Síochána Act 2005 as amended, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for managing and controlling the administration and business of An Garda Síochána. In addition, the allocation of Garda resources is a matter for the Commissioner, in light of identified operational demands. This includes responsibility for the allocation of Garda vehicles among the various Garda divisions. 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.

Significant capital investment is being made in An Garda Síochána, including a total of €46 million specifically for the Garda fleet between 2016 and 2021. Of this investment, a total of €9 million has been made available for purchase and fit-out of additional Garda vehicles in 2020. This continuing investment is intended to ensure that An Garda Síochána has a modern, effective and fit-for-purpose fleet and that Gardaí can be mobile, visible and responsive on the roads and in the community to prevent and tackle crime.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that all vehicle tenders and contracts for Garda Vehicles are handled through the Office of Government Procurement (OGP). An Garda Síochána Fleet Management Section engage with OGP on an ongoing basis to agree their vehicle needs and specifications. OGP put in place suitable contracts with suppliers and AGS draw down vehicles as required from these OGP contracts to meet their operational requirements.

I have no role in these matters as Minister for Justice.

I am further informed by the Garda authorities that there are no plans to purchase public order vans in 2021.

Separately, the Deputy may be interested to know that there are currently 29 Public Order Vans attached to the Garda fleet. The table below sets out number of Public Order vans attached to the fleet by region.

Region	Vans
DMR	18
Eastern	4
North/West	3
Southern	4
Total:	29

### Crime Data

697. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons convicted of armed robbery and jailed in 2020; and the number that received prison terms between 10 and 12, 12 and 14 and over 14 years, in tabular form. [12701/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I referred the Deputy's question to the Courts Service, who have informed me that it is not possible to collate the data as requested.

There is no unique offence code for armed robbery, as the Court Service categorises offences under the broad title of Theft/Fraud/Robbery/Handling stolen property.

### Garda Transport Provision

698. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if a recent contract for the supply of new Garda cars went out to tender; and if so, when the new cars will come into the fleet. [12702/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Deputy will be aware that in accordance with the Garda Síochána Act 2005, as amended, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána. This function includes responsibility for the allocation of Garda vehicles among the various Garda divisions. As Minister,

I have no direct role in these decisions. I am assured, however, that Garda management keep the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

I can inform the Deputy that significant capital investment is being made in An Garda Síochána, including a total of €46 million specifically for the Garda fleet between 2016 and 2021. Of this investment, a total of €9 million was made for the purchase and fit-out of additional Garda vehicles in 2020. This continuing investment is intended to ensure that An Garda Síochána has a modern, effective and fit-for-purpose fleet and that Gardaí can be mobile, visible and responsive on the roads and in the community to prevent and tackle crime.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that all vehicle tenders and contracts for Garda Vehicles are handled through the Office of Government Procurement (OGP). An Garda Síochána Fleet Management Section engage with OGP on an ongoing basis to agree their vehicle needs and specifications. OGP put in place suitable contracts with suppliers and AGS draw down vehicles as required from these OGP contracts to meet their operational requirements.

I have no role in these procedures as Minister for Justice.

I am further informed by the Garda authorities that based on an order placed in December 2020, a total of 77 vehicles are being fitted out and allocated in accordance with identified operational demands. I am further advised that a second order has been placed with delivery and fit-out expected in Quarter 2 of 2021.

Separately the Deputy may be interested to know that at 28 February 2021 there were 2,377 cars attached to the Garda fleet.

### **Garda National Immigration Bureau**

699. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if there are full-time document fraud experts working in the Garda National Immigration Bureau. [12703/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I am informed by the Garda Commissioner that there are two members of An Garda Síochána attached to the Garda National Immigration Bureau who are qualified document examination experts.

### **Garda Training**

700. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of gardaí trained in public order in each Garda division as of 1 March 2021, in tabular form; and when in-person Garda public order training will resume. [12704/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will be aware, in accordance with the Garda Síochána Act 2005, as amended, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána. This function includes responsibility for the allocation of Garda members among the various Garda divisions, as well as the management of Garda training. As Minister, I have no direct role in these matters. I am assured, however, that Garda management keep the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

The table below sets out the details of Public Order (PO) trained personnel as of 1 March 2021. I am informed by Garda authorities that for operational reasons it is not feasible to pro-

vide the data at Divisional level.

I am further informed that the resumption of PO training is dependent on COVID-19 restrictions. However, I am advised that the training for current PO personnel is certified until 31 December 2021.

Resource	DMR	NW Region	East Region	Sth Region	College	Total
PO Inspectors	9	2	3	5	0	19
PO Sergeants	37	9	24	12	0	82
PO Gardaí	237	57	153	90	0	538
PO Instructors	18	12	13	14	2	59
PO Trainers	4	0	0	2	3	9

### Prison Staff

701. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of incidents in which conflict resolution methods such as dialogue were used by prison officers from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021; and the number of prison officers who received training in conflict resolution during the same period. [12705/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Irish Prison Service has informed me that it is not possible to quantify the total number of incidents that are resolved by prison officers using conflict resolution techniques, including the use of dialogue. The Deputy will appreciate that incidents of conflict can range from minor incidents or disagreements amongst prisoners, which are easily resolved through dialogue and communications, to more serious incidents including violent incidents where a more physical intervention is required.

De-escalation and communication are major components of the conflict resolution training given to all prison officers. They play a significant role in how they carry out their duties. Many incidents are resolved, where de-escalation, communication and the inter-personal skills of prison officers are used and prevent the need for a physical response. It is the case that many of these incidents would not be routinely recorded.

The use of a physical intervention is governed by Prison Rule 93 which states “*where, for the purpose of maintaining or restoring good order or safe or secure custody, it is deemed necessary to use force in relation to a Prisoner, such force only as is reasonably necessary and proportionate to achieve that purpose shall be used*”. Physical interventions involving the use of force are governed by the Irish Prison Service Use of Force Standard Operating Procedures which states that that “*the Use of Force should only be undertaken as a last resort, after all other attempts to resolve or de-escalate the situation have failed .*”

The Use of Force Continuum, set out in this Standard Operating Procedure, defines the appropriate response by an officer to varying levels of behaviour of prisoners. It is not necessary to progress through each stage, and the individual needs to decide on the appropriate actions, bearing in mind prison rule 93, as the situation demands. In compliance with Irish Prison Service Policy, de-escalation attempts are made throughout the varying stages.

I am advised by the Irish Prison Service that from, 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021, 118 recruit prison officers received conflict resolution training in the Irish Prison Service College. In the same period 293 established prison officers received additional conflict resolution training as part of their continuous professional development. This figure is reduced from the previous year due to Covid - 19 measures which impacted on training.

## **Fines Administration**

702. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Justice the actions taken regarding the funds collected from the courts via the judges using the donation to poor box procedure as part of sentencing; if there are ways of accessing these funds for community projects and other causes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12711/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Under the provisions of the Courts Service Act 1998, management of the courts is the responsibility of the Courts Service, which is independent in its functions. However, in order to be of assistance to the Deputy, I have had enquiries made with the Courts Service and I am advised as follows.

The court poor box is a non-statutory system used to impose a financial charge on a defendant to be used for a charitable purpose, usually instead of imposing a criminal conviction. While each court of first instance (High, Circuit and District) has used the poor box system on occasion, it is mainly used in the District Court where the judge may order the defendant to pay a donation into the court poor box in lieu of another penalty. It usually arises where the offence is minor in nature and would not attract a custodial sentence.

Payments made to the court poor box are accounted for by the court office concerned and the accounting procedures are subject to audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General. Generally, charities are the recipients of poor box contributions, but the decision is solely at the discretion of the judge (who is independent in the matter of sentencing, as in other matters concerning the exercise of judicial functions, subject only to the Constitution and the law).

The Justice Plan 2021, which I published recently, commits to commencing a policy review of the Criminal Justice (Community Sanctions) Bill 2014 in consultation with the Probation Service and Irish Prison Service. It is intended that the proposed legislation will replace the Probation of Offenders Act 1907 with modern provisions dealing with community sanctions and the role of the Probation Service in the criminal justice system. The legislation will abolish the Court Poor Box and replace it with a statutory Reparation Fund, as recommended by the Law Reform Commission. The fund would provide for a fair, equitable and transparent system of reparation that will apply only to minor offences dealt with by the District Court. I expect to publish a policy review shortly.

## **Garda Data**

703. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Justice the number of cases that the Meath protective services unit has dealt with since being established. [12727/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Divisional Protective Services Unit for Westmeath/Meath was established on 29 September 2020. The unit was established across Westmeath and Meath in anticipation of the amalgamation of both Divisions under the new Operating Model and has two offices based in Athlone, Co. Westmeath and Navan, Co Meath. The unit operates in a joint approach regarding referrals received in terms of investigations with significant cooperation between both offices.

The current structure of this Protective Services Unit is one Inspector, two Detective Sergeants and 10 Detective Gardaí. The Deputy may wish to know that on 16 March 2021, two additional Detective Gardaí are scheduled to be allocated to the Protective Services Unit.

As of 8 March 2021, the date for which figures are most readily available, the number of

investigations associated with Westmeath/Meath DPSU unit stands at 211 incidents.

### Court Judgments

704. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons convicted of drink driving in Trim District Court in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [12728/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I am advised by the Courts Service that the table following shows the number of persons convicted for drink driving in Trim District Court in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021.

Year	No. of Persons convicted
Jan – Dec 2019	136
Jan – Dec 2020	67
Jan – Feb 2021	10

\* The Courts Service can only provide data in relation to instances where offence codes provided on the system were used by prosecutors. Prosecutors may have used uncoded free text offences and any such offences would not be included in the data provided.

### Firearms Licences

705. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Justice the licensing requirements for gun silencers. [12729/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice and Equality (Deputy James Browne) :** Under Section 1 of the Firearms Act 1925, as amended, silencers (also known as moderators) are defined as a component part of a firearm and therefore as a firearm for the purposes of the Act.

Furthermore, Statutory Instrument No 21 of 2008 (Firearms (Restricted Firearms and Ammunition) Order 2008) as amended, defines silencers as “any devices fitted or capable of being fitted to the firearms for the purpose of moderating or reducing the sound made on their discharge”.

Under section 7 of the Firearms and Offensive Weapons Act, 1990, a person is guilty of an offence if they have in their possession, sell, or transfer to another person, a silencer unless the possession, sale or transfer is authorised in writing by the Superintendent of the Garda District in which the person resides.

An Garda Síochána are responsible under provisions of the Firearms Act 1925 to 2009, for the administration and consideration of applications for the vast majority of firearm authorisations in the State.

It is my understanding that when an applicant is applying for a Firearms Certificate, they may also make application for a silencer to be fitted to the firearm. The granting Superintendent may authorise the use of the silencer with the firearm to be licensed. Where authorisation is given to have a silencer fitted to a licensed firearms, a letter ‘S’ is printed on the Firearms Certificate indicating that the authorisation is granted.

I am further advised that when considering an application for a silencer, a Superintendent of

An Garda Síochána must be satisfied that granting such an application will not endanger public safety or the peace and that the applicant has a special need that is, in the opinion of the Superintendent, sufficient to justify the granting of the authorisation for the silencer.

The legislation allows the Superintendent to attach conditions to the authorisation. Each application for a silencer is considered on its own individual merits by the Superintendent in accordance with law.

### Garda Transport Provision

706. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Justice the number of Garda cars and vans allocated to the Meath Garda division as of 26 February 2021. [12730/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will be aware, in accordance with the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána. The allocation of Garda resources is a matter for the Commissioner, in light of identified operational demands. This includes the allocation of vehicles among the various Garda divisions. As Minister, I have no direct role in these decisions. I am assured however, that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that the table below sets out the number of vehicles assigned to Meath Division at 28 February 2021.

Meath Division	Cars	Vans	Motorcycles	4x4	Total
Total	53	11	2	1	67

### Work Permits

707. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Justice the status of work permits for persons (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12737/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Access to the labour market for international protection applicants is provided for under the European Communities (Reception Conditions) Regulations (S.I. No. 230 of 2018). These Regulations give effect to Directive 2013/33/EU of 26 June 2013, laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (recast), and came into operation on 30 June 2018. The Regulations provided access to the labour market for an applicant who has not received a first instance decision within 9 months of making an international protection application.

The European Communities (Reception Conditions) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 (S.I. No. 52 of 2021) amended the labour market access permission provisions of the European Communities (Reception Conditions) Regulations 2018, to reduce the timeframe for labour market access from 9 to 6 months and to extend the validity of a labour market permission from 6 to 12 months. These Regulations make statutory provision for the new labour market access measures that I announced in January 2021.

It is the responsibility of the international protection applicant themselves to apply for a labour market access permission. An application cannot be made on their behalf by a prospective employer. However, a prospective employer may assist the applicant, particularly where language difficulties may arise. Employers' responsibilities are laid out in Regulation 14 of the European Communities (Reception Conditions) Regulations 2018. These include an obligation

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to keep certain records and to inform the Labour Market Access Unit (LMAU) of my Department when a permission holder is employed or ceases to be employed. This is done in cooperation with the permission holder using the LMA5 form.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the LMAU currently have limited access to the office and postal applications are unfortunately severely delayed. For this reason, all applicants are advised to email their application to LMAUapplications@justice.ie.

To renew a permission, the applicant should submit the LMA4 form, a copy of their in date Temporary Residence Certificate (TRC) and, if employed, an LMA5 form to LMAUapplications@justice.ie These forms should be submitted one month before the applicant's permission expires to allow time for processing. The LMAU are currently processing emailed applications received approximately two weeks ago.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may also 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.

### **Court Sittings**

**708. Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the impact the pandemic has had on court proceedings; and the level of backlog this is likely to cause for the future. [12743/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Government is committed to ensuring adequate resources for the courts in order to maintain access to justice for all citizens. This commitment was reinforced recently with the highest ever budgetary allocation for the Justice sector including €158.8 million for the Courts Service. This included €8 million for the new Courts Modernisation Programme along with an additional provision of €5.7m for COVID measures to enable court sittings take place in a socially distanced and safe environment. A significant priority for my Department and the Courts Service in the years ahead will be to significantly invest in digital technology, to transform the experience of practitioners and of court users.

I am pleased to say the Courts have continued to sit on priority matters in the areas of family law, criminal matters (especially cases involving people in custody), bail and urgent injunctions. Prior to the latest imposition of Level 5 restrictions, additional capacity was added to the courts infrastructure to facilitate the holding of numbers of courts close to pre-Covid levels. While every effort has been made to facilitate as much court business as possible unfortunately significant backlogs have been accrued in regard to certain case categories. The Government endeavours to ensure our courts continue to operate as effectively and efficiently as possible. My Department is in constant contact with the Courts Service and has maintained a schedule of regular interactions with the Courts Service throughout the pandemic to support the Service in addressing the issues that have arisen during this crisis, including where backlogs have arisen.

As the Deputy will be aware, under the provisions of the Courts Service Act 1998, management of the courts is the responsibility of the Courts Service, which is independent in exercising its functions. However, the Courts Service has advised that they continue to work with the Judiciary to prioritise business and the holding of courts to address areas of concern.

The Judiciary and the Courts Service have worked closely to adapt to changed circum-

stances and innovated through the use of technology to maintain the highest level of activity possible. This has seen the first remote courts being conducted over video technology as well as an expansion of the use of videolink technology particularly with the Prison Service. This investment and commitment to continuing to serve has enabled the Supreme Court and the Court of Appeal to continue with its throughput of cases and supported the other jurisdictions keep many lists up to date. In other jurisdictions, such as the High Court, the increased use of remote technology has led to an increase in cases heard. Investments continues to be made in these areas to further improve services and the Courts Service is currently rolling out videolink facilities to 43 additional courtrooms across the country and is looking to enhance the infrastructure used in virtual courts. Further investment is being made in hiring Croke Park to expand courtroom capacity in Dublin and using external venues in order that juries can be empanelled safely for Criminal trials. These measures are temporarily suspended during the current heightened restrictions but will be recommenced once it is safe to do so. Criminal trials can now take place in an increasing number of trial venues throughout Ireland. Public health guidelines on social distancing initially limited the number of county town courthouses that could hold jury trials but through adaption of courtrooms and the use of technology the number of trial venues has increased from 8 to 16. Criminal trials can now be hosted in the following venues outside Dublin: Carrick On Shannon, Castlebar, Cork, Drogheda, Ennis, Galway, Kilkenny, Letterkenny, Limerick, Monaghan, Mullingar, Sligo, Trim, Tullamore, Waterford and Wexford. The Courts have demonstrated an ability to resume a high level of activity immediately once society begins to reopen. Through staggering of court lists, positive callovers of cases on hand and the introduction of new people management procedures, Courts began to operate at near full capacity in the summer and autumn of last year and good progress had been made in dealing with arrears that built up during latest period of restrictions. The Courts Service expect similar results will be possible once current restrictions ease and continue to work closely with the Judiciary to identify areas of work that require particular attention. Work is on-going to manage day to day issues and to plan for reopening, including regular engagement with key stakeholders such as An Garda Síochána in relation to summonses and with the legal profession.

### **Deportation Orders**

**709. Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons awaiting deportation on foot of a deportation order; if her attention has been drawn to the fact that such persons have been required to give up work and are residing here in limbo; if she will reconsider the status of such persons due to the Covid-19 crisis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12841/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** In line with the clear commitments both I and the Taoiseach have given, no Deportation Orders are being enforced during the pandemic, except in circumstances where there are national security or serious public policy concerns. My Department has consistently adopted a pragmatic approach in this area in the context of Covid-19.

When a Deportation Order is made and served, the person concerned is legally obliged to remove themselves from the State and to remain outside of the State. Many people comply with this but may not notify the immigration authorities that they have done so. Accordingly, it is not always possible for the Immigration Service or the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) to know whether or not a Deportation Order has been complied with. It is only when a person served with such an Order fails to remove themselves from the State that the issue of enforcement of the Order by the GNIB arises.

A detailed consideration of all aspects of a person's case will have been carried out before a decision is made to grant them permission to remain in the State or to make a Deportation Order. This includes a full consideration of their private and family rights in accordance with the European Convention on Human Rights as well as consideration of their work situation, among other issues.

If a Deportation Order is subsequently made, Section 3 (11) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) allows an Order to be amended or revoked by making a request to me as Minister for Justice. In making a revocation request a person can raise new or changed circumstances in their case including in relation to their country of origin. I encourage people to be as detailed as possible in their representations to me and my Department so that fully informed decisions can be made at the appropriate time.

### **Insurance Industry**

710. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Justice if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding insurance reform; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12868/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Insurance reform is a key priority for this Government. That is reflected in the Programme for Government itself, in the Government's Action Plan for Insurance Reform, which was launched last December, and in the Justice Plan 2021, which I published recently.

The Government's Action Plan for Insurance Reform sets out 66 actions designed to bring down costs for consumers and business; introduce more competition into the market; prevent fraud and reduce the burden on business, community and voluntary organisations. The Action Plan includes actions to be taken by my Department, the Department of Finance and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The implementation of the Action Plan is being overseen by the Sub-Group on Insurance Reform within the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment.

With regard to personal injuries guidelines, the Deputy will be aware that the Judicial Council Act 2019 provides, inter alia, for the establishment of a Personal Injuries Guidelines Committee. Last October, the Government amended the Judicial Council Act 2019, to ensure that the personal injuries guidelines would be adopted and published by, at the latest, 31 July 2021, three months earlier than originally required under the Act.

Draft Guidelines were furnished to the Board of the Judicial Council last December and, following consideration, were adopted by the Judicial Council on 6 March 2021 and published.

Yesterday, I secured Cabinet approval to amend the Judicial Council Act 2019 and the Personal Injuries Assessment Board Act 2003 to bring the new Personal Injuries Guidelines into effect. Bringing the new Personal Injuries Guidelines into operation is a key action in my Justice Plan 2021, and I intend that the Guidelines will take effect in April.

In addition to the adoption and publication of the personal injury guidelines, my Department is developing proposals in relation to:

- the Occupiers' Liability Act 1995,
- the discount rate applied to awards in cases of catastrophic injury, and

- the Law Reform Commission Report on the Capping Damages in Personal Injury Actions.

### **Prison Inspections**

711. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice her views in relation to the Inspector of Prisons commencing a Covid-19 thematic inspection of all Irish prisons; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12875/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy may be aware, the Office of the Inspector of Prisons is a statutory body, independent in how it carries out its work, set up under the Prisons Act 2007. The Inspector's key role is to carry out regular inspections of prisons. The Office is required to inspect the twelve prisons in Ireland to examine the treatment and conditions for prisoners and for staff. The Inspector may also investigate any matter arising out of the management or operation of a prison and submit a report on any such investigation.

In late 2020, the Office began the process of preparing an inspection schedule in line with the 2020 Framework for the Inspection of Irish Prisons and the 2020-2023 Strategic Plan. Inspections for 2021 were to include three general inspections and one thematic inspection, with four inspection reports to be submitted to me by the conclusion of 2021.

However, as you will appreciate, as of late January 2021, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its current state of transmission in and beyond prisons, the Office has determined it should suspend its 2021 general inspection programme until such point that a full inspection team can enter the prison safely.

The Inspector is cognisant of the need to provide oversight of prisons and to inform me of the situation for prisoners and staff working in prisons during the pandemic. In response to this need, the Inspector embarked on a COVID-19 focused inspection schedule designed to assess COVID-19 thematic issues in line with human rights standards and the Framework Focus Areas (Safety & Security, Respect & Dignity, Health & Wellbeing, Rehabilitation & Development and Resettlement). The first COVID-19 Thematic Inspection visit has recently taken place in Mountjoy Prison from 1 to 4 March 2021.

In addition, I am informed that COVID-19 Thematic Inspections will be complemented by ongoing COVID-19 telephone communications with each of the prisons in Ireland. I am advised that the Inspectorate will carry out telephone calls to prisons at least every two weeks to take account of the status of the aforementioned Framework Focus Areas. The Inspectorate will also distribute an online survey for prison staff across the prison estate. The objective of the survey will be to gain an understanding of how prison staff are handling challenges associated with COVID-19. These inspection activities will be supplemented by statistical data requested from the Irish Prison Service.

The Irish Prison Service welcome such oversight and inspection, and in particular the focus of the thematic inspection on Covid-19 which has hugely impacted the services provided over the last year. While the Prison Service has been relatively successful in mitigating against the risks associated with the pandemic and have managed containing infection and outbreak controls, the Prison Service also look forward to the learnings that will be derived from the Inspector's findings and recommendations.

### **Departmental Internships**

712. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Justice the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under her aegis in 2019; the cost in terms of wages and allowances; and the estimated numerical capacity of State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis. [12959/21]

**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.

### Passport Controls

713. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice further to Parliamentary Question No. 632 of 17 February 2021, the scientific and medical evidence on which the new visa requirements on passport holders from a number of countries was based; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13006/21]

714. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice further to Parliamentary Question No. 632 of 17 February 2021, the changes to the visa requirements for passport holders of other jurisdictions made since 17 February 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13007/21]

715. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice further to Parliamentary Question No. 632 of 17 February 2021, the status of the review of new visa requirements on passport holders from a number of countries; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13008/21]

716. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice further to Parliamentary Question No. 632 of 17 February 2021, if measurements such as the cumulative 14-day incidence rates of confirmed cases of Covid-19 per 100,000 population in a country and or the R number are used in deciding on the imposition of new visa requirements on passport holders from a number of countries; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13009/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 713 to 716, inclusive, together.

The visa measures referred to by the Deputy are designed to support our current public health restrictions on movement, including into and out of Ireland.

The travel restrictions and the measures introduced as part of the Government's efforts to interrupt the transmission of COVID-19, mean that travel may not be possible and, even if possible, is not advisable unless absolutely essential. It is currently against the law for any person (regardless of nationality or passport) to travel within Ireland for non-essential purposes and people can be fined for doing so.

The strong advice is that everyone, regardless of their nationality or visa/preclearance status, or where they started their travel from, who cannot provide proof of an essential purpose to travel to or within Ireland, should not travel to Ireland.

The framework for restrictive measures is set out in the Government's Resilience and Recovery: Plan for Living with COVID 19. When making such decisions, the Government considers the expert public health advices of NPHE to tackle the disease.

I have reviewed the interim visa measures introduced on South American countries and

South Africa and have decided to use my powers, under Section 17 of the Immigration Act 2004, to maintain these visa requirements after 5 March and until no longer needed for public health reasons. I have not introduced any further visa requirements since 17 February 2021. Further visa requirements may be introduced to other non-EEA countries in the future, where they are deemed necessary and appropriate, to support public health measures approved by the Government.

### **Garda Stations**

717. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Justice the progress made on the new Clonmel Garda station at Kickham Barracks; when the contract will be awarded; and the commencement date for same. [13038/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner is, by law, responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána and for the effective and efficient deployment of Garda resources, including the provision of Garda stations. Furthermore, the Office of Public Works (OPW) has responsibility for the provision and maintenance of Garda accommodation and works in relation to Garda accommodation are progressed by the Garda authorities working in close cooperation with the OPW.

I am assured by the Commissioner that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources, including the provision of new stations, under continual review in the context of policing priorities and crime trends, to ensure their optimum use.

Following a review of An Garda Síochána's accommodation requirements, the Commissioner and his management team decided that a Public Private Partnership (PPP) should proceed to deliver new stations in Macroom and in Clonmel. I am advised by the Garda authorities that the new station in Clonmel is currently in the planning application process and is being managed by the OPW on behalf of An Garda Síochána.

I am further advised by the Garda authorities that the PPP process is being managed by the National Development Finance Agency (NDFA), and that these two stations are priorities for the Commissioner.

I can further inform the Deputy that 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. Furthermore, €34 million has been allocated for the Capital Building and Refurbishment Programme.

### **Prison Visiting Regulations**

718. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Justice the provisions in place for prisoners to receive family visits when restrictions are eased. [13132/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I wish to advise the Deputy that under the Irish Prison Service Framework for Restrictive Measures for Living with Covid-19, which was developed in line with the National Framework published by the Government in September last year, all physical visits to prisons are suspended under Level 4 and Level 5.

The Irish Prison Service is fully committed to facilitating the return of physical visits once the national restrictions have been reduced to level 3 and below and based on advice at the time from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) and the Health Service Executive.

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A new plan for the return of physical visits will be developed by the Irish Prison Service as part of the unwinding of Covid-19 restrictions as advised by the Government and this will include the continuation of certain infection control measures to continue to prevent the possible spread of the virus in our prisons. The measures and arrangement for physical visits will be informed by Public Health advice and will take account of a number of factors including visiting capacity, the need for continued social distancing and external factors such as the level of infection in the community at that time.

It is likely that all visitors will continue to be subject to the Covid-19 screening procedures which have been in place since March 2020 and visitors will be requested not to attend if they have any symptoms, have been in contact with a person who has gone for testing, if they themselves have tested positive for Covid-19 and have yet to be cleared by their doctor, or if they have been abroad in the preceding fortnight.

Details on the procedures and arrangements will be announced by the Irish Prison Service, in advance of the return of visits.

In the interim, the Irish Prison Service is acutely aware of the need for prisoners to maintain contact with their families and a new video visit system was introduced which has allowed families to continue to support those in custody.

I am advised by the Irish Prison Service that when physical visits recommence, they will also retain the option of video calls for prisoners.

### **Work Permits**

719. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice if she has plans to decrease the processing times in respect of atypical work permits especially for persons classed as essential workers; if her attention has been drawn to the fact that the delay in processing of such permits is having a negative impact on industries such as the fishing industry as essential workers are being lost to other jurisdictions due to more favourable processing times of employment permits in those jurisdictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13166/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I can inform the Deputy that there are currently no delays in the processing of applications for permission under the Atypical Working Scheme (AWS).

The Scheme supports a vast array of industries who have a requirement for specialised or highly-skilled individuals. In addition, the AWS Unit of the Immigration Service of my Department processes a considerable number of applications for permission made by or on behalf of frontline medical personnel who are urgently required to assist in the national response to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

To date this year, over 1,000 decisions have issued on applications for permission under the Scheme. The vast majority (over 80%) of these applications have been made by or on behalf of doctors and nurses. In line with agreements with the Health Services Executive, the Department of Health and other key stakeholders in the provision of these essential services in the State, processing of applications in the healthcare sector is occurring within 5 working days of receipt of all in-order application documents. While other AWS stakeholders are advised that the prioritisation of such applications may result in delays experienced by non-medical applicants, in practice no such delays exist at present.

Approximately 50 applications have been received to date this year for permission to work

in the Irish fishing fleet, and decisions have issued in respect of the vast majority of these applications. The average processing time for properly completed applications for this sector to date in 2021, is less than 7 working days. The stated minimum processing time under the published terms of the Scheme is 21 working days.

### **Citizenship Status**

720. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Justice if an application for Irish citizenship by a person (details supplied) will be progressed to decision stage; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13178/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** An application for a certificate of naturalisation was received from the person referred to by the Deputy on 24 October 2018. This application is currently being processed with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision as expeditiously as possible. If any further documentation is required, it will be requested from the person in due course.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their application without delay. However, the nature of the naturalisation process is such that, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. In some instances, completing the necessary checks can take a considerable period of time.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility at [INISOireachtasMail@justice.ie](mailto: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.

### **Visa Applications**

721. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the current valid time period for a visa awarded to a person (details supplied); if an extension is required in this case; if so, if an extension will be facilitated; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13358/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The visa sticker issued for the application referred to by the Deputy has a validity period from 21 October 2020 to 21 April 2021. In the normal course of events, the person concerned could travel to Ireland between the dates of validity, including the first and last dates on the visa, and travel outside of these dates would not be permitted.

The travel restrictions and the measures introduced as part of the Government's efforts to interrupt the transmission of COVID-19 means that travel may not be possible at this time and even if possible is not advisable unless absolutely essential. The strong advice is that everyone, regardless of their nationality or visa/preclearance status, or where they started their travel

from, who cannot provide proof of an essential purpose to travel to or within Ireland, should not travel to Ireland.

It is open to the Visa Office to consider, on a case by case basis, issuing a new visa without the need to make another visa application. If they cannot travel before the expiry of their current visa, the person concerned should send their passport to the Visa Office, Embassy or Honorary Consulate to which they would be submitting a new application. They should also include:

- A cover letter explaining why the visa was not used;
- A letter from their employer stating employment is still available to them;
- Any other information which they would like the Visa Officer to take into account when deciding if a new visa will be issued without making a new application.

If the original Employment Permit (or Atypical Working Authorisation) has expired or is expiring soon then they will also need to submit a new Employment Permit or Working Holiday Authorisation.

### **Visa Applications**

722. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the current valid time period for a visa awarded to a person (details supplied); if an extension is required in this case; if an extension will be facilitated; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13359/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The visa sticker issued for the application referred to by the Deputy has a validity period from 21 October 2020 to 21 April 2021. In the normal course of events, the person concerned could travel to Ireland between the dates of validity, including the first and last dates on the visa, and travel outside of these dates would not be permitted.

The travel restrictions and the measures introduced as part of the Government's efforts to interrupt the transmission of COVID-19 means that travel may not be possible at this time and even if possible is not advisable unless absolutely essential. The strong advice is that everyone, regardless of their nationality or visa/preclearance status, or where they started their travel from, who cannot provide proof of an essential purpose to travel to or within Ireland, should not travel to Ireland.

It is open to the Visa Office to consider, on a case by case basis, issuing a new visa without the need to make another visa application. If they cannot travel before the expiry of their current visa, the person concerned should send their passport to the Visa Office, Embassy or Honorary Consulate to which they would be submitting a new application. They should also include:

- A cover letter explaining why the visa was not used;
- A letter from their employer stating employment is still available to them;
- Any other information which they would like the Visa Officer to take into account when deciding if a new visa will be issued without making a new application.

If the original Employment Permit (or Atypical Working Authorisation) has expired or is expiring soon then they will also need to submit a new Employment Permit or Working Holiday Authorisation.

**Prison Service Staff**

723. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Justice the reason for the delay in processing security checks for applications to the Irish Prison Service; when a person (details supplied) will be informed if they have passed their checks; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13390/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will understand, prior to making an appointment to the position of recruit prison officer, the Irish Prison Service is obliged to make such inquiries as are deemed necessary to determine the suitability of candidates.

Until all stages of the recruitment process have been fully completed, a final determination as to the success of any candidate cannot be made, nor can it be deemed or inferred that such a determination has been made.

Given the level of responsibility in prison officer positions, it is necessary for checks to be carried out by An Garda Síochána on persons considered for this employment.

These checks can take time to complete for a variety of reasons, some of which may be outside of the control of the Garda Authorities, depending on the circumstances of the individual case.

However, I am assured that every effort is made to expedite this process to the greatest extent possible.

**International Protection**

724. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons seeking international protection in each of the past ten years by country of origin for this period. [13395/21]

728. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Justice the breakdown of the circumstances in relation to applicants for international protection over the past ten years with regard to unaccompanied minors, single adults, couples and couples with extended families; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13406/21]

730. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Justice the breakdown of applicants for international protection over the past ten years by the number of unaccompanied minors, single adults, couples and couples with children; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13422/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 724, 728 and 730 together.

The information requested by the Deputy is provided in the tables attached to this response.

Statistics in respect of single adults, couples and couples with extended families are not readily available. However, to be of assistance to the Deputy we have provided the number of applicants who, at time of application, were over 18 years of age, under 18 years of age or an unaccompanied minor for each of the years requested.

Where the number of decisions for individual countries is low (less than 6), a breakdown by country is not provided. This is for reasons of confidentiality, as provided for under Section 26 of the International Protection Act 2015.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-10\_pq724a-10-03-21\_en.xlsx">Statistics</a>]

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-10\_pq724b-10-03-21\_en.xlsx">Statistics</a>]

### **International Protection**

725. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Justice the number of applications for international protection which were decided definitively in each of the past ten years; the number of applications which were declined international protection in each of the past ten years; and the country of origin of these applicants. [13397/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The information requested by the Deputy is provided in the tables attached to this response. The figures relate to the year in which the decision was made, not the year in which the application was made.

Decisions on international protection are made by the Ministerial Decisions Unit (MDU) of my Department. MDU processes the recommendations received from the International Protection Office (IPO) and the decisions of the International Protection Appeals Tribunal (IPAT).

Where the number of decisions for individual countries is low (less than 6), a breakdown by country is not provided. This is for reasons of confidentiality, as provided for under Section 26 of the International Protection Act 2015.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-11\_pq725-10-03-2021\_en.xlsx">Applications for International Protection</a>]

### **International Protection**

726. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Justice if the State operates a system of safe countries in which applicants for international protection from such countries are deemed to be inadmissible due to the satisfaction of the State with the rule of law, human rights, the independence of the court system and the treatment of minorities in such jurisdictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13401/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** There are two safe country concepts that can apply to applicants for international protection under EU law, namely Safe Country of Origin and Safe Third Country.

Under section 72 of the International Protection Act 2015, and the International Protection Act 2015 (Safe Countries of Origin) Order 2018 (Statutory Instrument no 121 of 2018), the following countries were designated as safe countries of origin with effect from 16 April 2018:

- Albania;
- Bosnia and Herzegovina;
- Georgia;
- Kosovo;
- Macedonia (Former Yugoslav Republic of);

- Montenegro;
- Serbia; and
- South Africa.

If an applicant for international protection in the State is from one of these countries, their application will still receive a full consideration on its merits in the International Protection Office (IPO). They are not deemed inadmissible merely by coming from one of these countries.

If the recommendation of an International Protection Officer is that the applicant should be given neither a refugee declaration nor a subsidiary protection declaration and includes the finding that they are from a safe country of origin, an appeal can be lodged in writing within 10 working days to the International Protection Appeals Tribunal (IPAT). Unless the IPAT considers it is not in the interests of justice to do so, it shall make its decision in relation to the appeal without holding an oral hearing.

Part 18 of the Brexit Omnibus Act 2020, which was commenced at 11:00 pm on 31 December 2020, amends the International Protection Act 2015, to enable the Minister for Justice to designate a country as a Safe Third Country, where certain conditions are met in that country including:

- life and liberty are not threatened on account of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion;
- the principle of non-refoulement is respected; and
- the possibility exists to request refugee status and if found to be a refugee to receive protection in accordance with the Geneva Convention.

Where a person arrives here from a country designated as a Safe Third Country and claims international protection their application can be determined as inadmissible and the person returned to the safe third country for their application for protection to be considered there. This is in line with the EU Procedures Directive (2005/85/EU).

Before an application can be determined as inadmissible, the third country must be considered safe for the person concerned including that they will not be subjected to the death penalty, torture, or other inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and they have a sufficient connection with that country such that it would be reasonable for them to be returned there.

Following the United Kingdom's exit from the EU and an examination of the necessary criteria, the International Protection Act 2015 (Safe Third Country) Order 2020, came into effect from 11:00 pm on 31 December 2020. The Order designates the UK as a safe third country for the purpose of the International Protection Act 2015, and enables the Minister for Justice to determine an application for international protection as inadmissible where the person has arrived in the State from the UK and where the relevant criteria are met.

### **International Protection**

727. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Justice the number of applicants for international protection whose applications were declined in each of the past ten years who were subsequently deported; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13404/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I can confirm that in line with the clear

commitments that both I and the Taoiseach have given, the position remains that no further deportation orders are being enforced during the Covid-19 pandemic, except in circumstances where an individual may be a threat to national security, and whose presence in Ireland would be contrary to the public interest.

The table below outlines the number of effected Deportation Orders (DOs) by year as a result of refused asylum/international protection applications since 2011.

The number of effected DOs over any given period, is a combination of people deported or forcibly removed by the Garda National Immigration Bureau, as well as people who have left the State themselves on foot of a DO, in cases where this has come to the attention of the relevant authorities.

Refused applicants are notified of final decisions by the Ministerial Decisions Unit (MDU) of the International Protection Office (IPO). Annual figures of MDU refusals are also included in the table below.

Year	MDU refusals	DO's effected on refused asylum cases
2011	1,044	5
2012	505	18
2013	343	16
2014	1,402	5
2015	2,006	21
2016	1,861	77
2017	378	46
2018	543	69
2019	1,749	133
2020	957	53
Total	10,788	443

These figures include cases where deportation orders were made under both section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) and section 51 of the International Protection Act 2015.

The figures include international protection applications refused under the provisions of the Refugee Act 1996, the Subsidiary Protection Regulations 2006 and 2013 and the International Protection Act 2015.

The figures for deportation orders effected in a particular year will inevitably include orders made in a previous year.

*Question No. 728 answered with Question No. 724.*

### Coroners Service

729. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice if her attention has been drawn to the backlog which exists in the Coroner's Courts around the country due to Covid-19 and the way this is impacting on bereaved families who are awaiting death certificates and the consequences of such delays for probate and other matters; and the steps she will take to address the matter. [13408/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will be aware, Coroners are independent in the conduct of their functions and neither I nor my Department have any role in the scheduling of inquests.

Most coroners hold inquests in local court houses, and as a result of Covid-19 restrictions, activity in these facilities has unfortunately been severely curtailed. 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.

My Department is aware that the delay in holding inquests is causing distress for families and officials from my Department are liaising with the Courts Service on this matter. The Courts Service works closely with coroners across the country to facilitate inquests and will do so once again when restrictions ease.

In response to the pandemic, I understand that some coroners are holding, what are referred to as ‘documentary inquests’ or remote inquests, which require very small numbers of attendees and take place with the agreement of families. Larger inquests, requiring multiple witnesses, are being rescheduled to a later date.

The revised Government plan in relation to Covid-19, published last week, refers to the need for each government department to develop sectoral plans to mitigate backlogs, and anticipate pent up demand or unmet needs arising from restrictions. This will build on the new ways of working that have already been brought into place, and will include consideration of the issues in relation to coroners, as appropriate. My Department continues to keep service delivery across the justice sector under review in the context of the pandemic.

My Department collates and publishes annual statistics on the activities of each coroner. The annual statistics on how many deaths were reported to coroners, how many Post-Mortem examinations were ordered by coroners, and how many inquests were held by coroners can be found under the “Publications” tab on [www.coroners.ie](http://www.coroners.ie). My Department is currently in the process of compiling the statistics in respect of 2020, and when complete, these will be published on the website.

*Question No. 730 answered with Question No. 724.*

### **Asylum Seekers**

731. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Justice if Ireland is a signatory to the Dublin Convention and compliant with the provisions of same (details supplied); the position regarding the operation of the directive here; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13427/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Ireland has opted-in to what is commonly referred to as the Dublin III Regulation (Regulation (EU) No. 604/2013). The Dublin Regulation sets out the criteria and mechanisms for determining the Member State responsible for examining an application for international protection made in one of the Member States.

The European Union (Dublin System) Regulations 2018 (SI No. 62 of 2018) came into effect on 6 March 2018. The Regulations give further effect to the Dublin III Regulation in Ireland. It is a matter for the European Commission to assess if a Member State is compliant with EU legislation.

The Dublin Unit of the International Protection Office (IPO) is responsible for determining whether applicants should be transferred to another Member State or have their application assessed in Ireland. The Unit also responds to requests from other Member States to transfer applicants to Ireland.

## Departmental Advertising

732. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Justice the amount spent across her Department on advertising in relation to Covid-19, by month and by media outlet (details supplied), from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021. [13563/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department has been working closely with all government departments to support the national COVID-19 effort. My Department has contributed to, and participated in, the large scale cross-Government communications programme which has been running since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has involved supporting and amplifying Government and public health messaging through both our internal and external communications channels. There has been no spending by my Department on advertising directly related to COVID-19 during the period in question.

While not specifically a campaign to raise awareness of COVID-19, since March 2020 my Department has been running the important ‘Still Here’ campaign. This purpose of this campaign is to reassure victims of domestic abuse that support services from State agencies and the voluntary sector are still available and accessible during the COVID-19 pandemic, regardless of what level of restrictions are in place.

In addition to reminding victims of domestic abuse that help is ‘Still Here’, the campaign also reminds anyone concerned for their safety that the restrictions on movement do not apply to people at risk or who are removing themselves from a domestic abuse situation.

To date the Department has spent €397,944.36 on the Still Here campaign. The campaign so far has included two major media bursts, 16 April – 3 May 2020 and Oct 26 to Nov 8 2020. As requested by the Deputy, I have provided further breakdown of that spend by TV and Radio media outlet for both bursts. It is not possible to break down these figures per month as requested, but as both bursts were less than a month, I trust this information will be of value to the Deputy.

### Still Here - TV Burst 1

Media Outlet	Total Spend
RTÉ	€23,510.04
Virgin	€17,890.76
TG4	€556.27
Sky	€9,558.22
4 Digital	€3,020.20

### Still Here - Radio Burst 1

Media Outlet	Total Spend
RTÉ	€20,731.83
Newstalk	€12,951.37
Media Central	€6,201.74
Urban Media	€9,771.93
Cork's Red FM	€1,403.77
IRS+	€9,899.73

### Still Here - TV Burst 2

Media Outlet	Total Spend
RTÉ	€44,683.92
Virgin	€17,068.09
TG4	€1,054.26
Sky	€16,838.27
4 Digital	€4,116.04

Still Here - **Radio Burst 2**

Media Outlet	Total Spending
RTÉ	€21,872.54
Newstalk	€8,493.85
Media Central	€12,811.88
Urban Media	€18,352.16
IRS+	€7,574.59

### Speech and Language Therapy

733. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health the status of the speech and language and occupational therapists in a school (details supplied); if the school will lose the services in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13384/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible

### Health Services Provision

734. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health if he will ensure age appropriate treatment can be provided to a person (details supplied). [13407/21]

**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 to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Health Services Provision

735. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of an operation for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12478/21]

**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.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

736. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if he has considered introducing a 24-7 helpline for follow-up care for those who have received the Covid-19 vaccine who may experience some adverse effects and require assistance out of hours; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12486/21]

737. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health the out of hours facilities available for those who have received the Covid-19 vaccine who may experience some adverse side effects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12487/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 737 and 736 together.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

738. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health if a family (details supplied) can be permitted to complete construction works on their house by putting in windows and doors in order that the property can be made secure to prevent any further damage to their belongings. [12489/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The public health restrictions 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 23rd February, 2021, the Government published the revised plan: Covid 19 Resilience &

Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead. This three part plan reviews the learnings from our experience to date, considers the enormous impacts our efforts to manage and suppress the disease have had on our economy and on our society and sets out a cautious and measured approach to the easing of restrictions over the coming months.

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 the public health measures currently in place for construction can be found at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/#construction>

The Regulations in effect providing for the current public health restrictions are the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 10) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 701 of 2020) as amended.. These Regulations set out what are essential construction and developments.

Part 2 of the Schedule to the Principal Regulations, paragraph 5.(i) provides 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.”

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/>

You may wish to note that my Department does not have responsibility for the construction sector. The shutdown of the construction sector (including the construction and developments permitted to continue), was confirmed by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage by press release on the 6 January, 2021. Further information on these projects is available here:- <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/53a69-minister-obrien-confirms-shutdown-in-construction-activity/>

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

739. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Health the reason for the delay in receiving a cataract surgery appointment in the case of a person (details supplied) at Nenagh General Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12492/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I fully acknowledge the distress and inconvenience for patients and their families when elective procedures are cancelled, particularly for clinically urgent procedures. While every effort is made to avoid cancellation or postponement of planned procedures, the HSE has advised that planned procedures and operations can be postponed or cancelled for a variety of reasons including capacity issues due to increased scheduled and unscheduled care demand.

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.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

740. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the reason a person (details supplied) has been waiting a long time for a scan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12493/21]

**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**

741. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health when adults with intellectual disabilities living in residential facilities will receive the Covid-19 vaccination; if there are plans to move them up the priority list from phase 8 given the particular vulnerabilities involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12494/21]

**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.

Vaccination of those aged 70 and older (in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74) 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.

In relation to the categories of very high risk and high risk conditions, this list is not exhaustive. It may also include people who have been classed as at very high risk, based on clinical judgement and an assessment of need. It is recommended that people discuss this with their treating physician who is in the best position to give appropriate advice.

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/>

742. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding deployment of HSE speech and language therapists as contact tracers; if they will be returning to their pre-Covid-19 roles as speech and language therapists; when this is likely to occur; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12497/21]

**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.

### **Hospital Equipment**

743. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the date the HSE placed the order for the two oxygen generators for University Hospital Galway in response to Covid-19; and the date the units were delivered to the hospital. [12503/21]

744. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the specific details of the elements of the installation of the two oxygen generators at University Hospital Galway that are still ongoing. [12504/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 743 and 744 together.

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 Funding**

745. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of funding for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12505/21]

**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.

### **Medicinal Products**

746. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE plans to study or sanction the use of Ivermectin in the treatment of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12506/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Deputy is advised that, at the request of the NPHET, the HIQA conducted a rapid evidence review to identify studies on the effectiveness of (i) pharmaceutical and (ii) non-pharmaceutical interventions, in the ambulatory setting, aimed at reducing progression to severe disease in individuals with confirmed or suspected COVID-19. This evidence review included a review of relevant studies in relation to Ivermectin.

Low certainty or very low certainty evidence was identified in relation to a small number of

interventions. However, the HIQA noted the low quality of the evidence available including the high risk of bias, small sample sizes and short durations of follow-up different trials and advised that results from these studies should not be used to inform decision-making with respect to effectiveness.

The HIQA's overall finding was that there is currently insufficient evidence of either effectiveness or safety to support the use of any pharmaceutical intervention in the community setting to reduce the risk of progression to severe disease in patients who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 unless as part of an ongoing monitored clinical trial. Furthermore, no evidence was identified for the effectiveness or safety of any non-pharmaceutical intervention in the community setting.

As confirmed by the HIQA's COVID-19 Expert Advisory Group: ([https://www.hiqa.ie/sites/default/files/2021-02/Interventions-to-prevent-progression\\_Advice.pdf](https://www.hiqa.ie/sites/default/files/2021-02/Interventions-to-prevent-progression_Advice.pdf)), evidence regarding the effectiveness of pharmaceutical treatments intended for systemic use, must be subject to the highest standards of rigour. Where a pharmaceutical intervention is recommended in the absence of appropriate supportive evidence, there is a significant potential for harm to the patient. Whereas this risk of harm may be justified in certain circumstances (e.g. the intervention poses minimal risk, or the setting involves patients with high potential to gain due to almost certain risk of severe adverse consequences in absence of any intervention) this is less likely to be the case in the setting of mild disease, where a great number of otherwise well patients would potentially receive the intervention.

The HIQA has also advised my Department that several international health technology assessment or guideline development organisations have specifically reviewed the evidence to date on ivermectin in COVID-19 and have cautioned or advised against the use of ivermectin outside the setting of clinical trials on the basis of the current evidence. The HIQA has also advised that the pharmaceutical company MSD (Merck, USA), which holds a license in the USA for the use of ivermectin as an antiparasitic agent, on 4th February 2021 published a statement including the following:

*"It is important to note that, to-date, our analysis has identified:*

*- No scientific basis for a potential therapeutic effect against COVID-19 from pre-clinical studies;*

*- No meaningful evidence for clinical activity or clinical efficacy in patients with COVID-19 disease, and;*

*- A concerning lack of safety data in the majority of studies.*

*We do not believe that the data available support the safety and efficacy of ivermectin beyond the doses and populations indicated in the regulatory agency-approved prescribing information."*

I trust that the above information satisfactorily addresses your question.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

747. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who have contracted Covid-19 in nursing homes, other long-term residential care facilities, palliative care settings and in hospital; the mortalities for same, by patient and by worker, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12511/21]

**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.

### **Vaccination Programme**

748. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health when Covid-19 vaccines will be administered to psychiatric nursing staff at a facility (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12515/21]

**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 National Service Plan**

749. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the funding provided for in the Health Service Executive National Service Plan 2021 to implement new models of care, including the provision of wraparound supports for homeless persons with complex and multiple needs as part of an integrated housing and health policy response in line with the Housing First National Implementation Plan 2018-2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12520/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Mental Health Services**

750. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health when an appointment for access to mental health services will be provided in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12533/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the deputy as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

751. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health if he will exempt those travelling abroad to New Zealand to be with a terminally ill parent from mandatory quarantine on their return to Ireland; if this constitutes travelling for unavoidable and time sensitive medical reasons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12538/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Travellers arriving to Ireland from overseas are required to complete a COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form, to present evidence of a negative pre-departure RT-PCR test and to observe mandatory quarantine.

Limited exemptions to quarantine requirements are set out in SI No. 44/2021.

The Government gives continuing consideration to policy on international travel informed by the international situation and by public health advice.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

752. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health if changes are to be made to the strategy of providing updated public health guidelines with regard to the national framework for living With Covid-19 in consideration of the confusion created by utilising multiple sources and the effect that conflicting information has on public understanding and morale. [12544/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In line with best practice international advice and guidance provided by the WHO and the ECDC, communications has been a cornerstone of my Department and wider Government's response to Covid-19 from the outset of this pandemic. My Department has invested in significant public health communications campaigns to ensure that all members of the community are aware of the public health guidelines, and the significant work carried out by the NPHE.

Weekly press briefings regarding Covid-19 are provided to ensure that experts in public health are to the fore when informing the public of the latest guidelines in place and the suggested behaviours to adhere to in order to ensure safety within our society. These briefings give journalists from a broad cross section of the media, the opportunity to ask key health figures such as the Chief Medical Officer and Deputy Chief Medical Officer questions on a regular basis, in order to counter the potential spread of misinformation which may lead to confusion amongst the public.

Staff within my Department continue to work hard in order to ensure the public are informed appropriately of the dangers of the virus, ensuring awareness on the matter through the Government website, information booklets and social media avenues where informative videos are regularly posted. The pattern of the disease is changing regularly and the methods used to communicate the Framework for Living With Covid-19 are under constant review and will be updated accordingly.

### **Speech and Language Therapy**

753. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health if there is a roadmap to resume speech and language therapy and occupational therapy services in County Clare; when the relevant therapists who normally carry out this service and who have been redeployed to carry out contact tracing or other duties will return to their posts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12546/21]

**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.

### **General Practitioner Services**

754. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health if there is a roadmap for Shannon Doc services to resume to a full service once level 5 restrictions are eased; if an updated schedule will be provided of opening and closing times of each clinic; if this information is represented correctly on the relevant HSE website; if there are plans to permanently close any of the clinic locations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12547/21]

**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

755. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12549/21]

**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.

### Legislative Measures

756. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the progress made since 27 June 2020 to establish exclusion zones around medical facilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12553/21]

761. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the status of the promised legislation to establish exclusion zones around medical facilities to ensure that women have safe access to reproductive healthcare facilities, as set out in the programme for government; and the timeline for the introduction and passage of same. [12570/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 756 and 761 together.

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.

### Hospital Procedures

757. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to resume reconstructive surgery services for those receiving cancer treatment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12554/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Nursing Education**

758. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to introduce a return of the service arrangement payment for those studying nursing to allow for a waiving of student fees in return for working in the HSE for a set period of time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12556/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I thank the Deputy for clarifying that she refers to the sponsorship scheme available for support staff in the Irish public health service wishing to obtain a qualification in nursing or midwifery. To be eligible, applicants must be directly involved in delivering care to patients or clients in a nursing context. For example, healthcare assistants and multi-task attendants are eligible for the sponsorship scheme. The number of sponsorships available each year is determined by the Office of the Nursing and Midwifery Services Director in the HSE. This scheme commenced in 2002 and 30 sponsorships have been awarded each year since 2017.

While in the scheme, the students retain their substantive posts. The students' basic salary is paid for the duration of their nursing or midwifery degree programme and they are expected to return to their post outside of the academic semesters for the duration of the programme.

After completing the degree programme, graduates must register as a nurse or midwife with the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland (NMBI). They are also asked to sign a service agreement and commit to work as a registered nurse or midwife in the Irish health services for a period of 5 years after registration.

Further information on the requirements and application process of the sponsorship scheme can be found on <https://healthservice.hse.ie/about-us/onmsd/cpd-for-nurses-and-midwives/onmsd-sponsorship-schemes/public-health-service-employees.html>.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

759. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) in County Cork will be allocated a date for orthopaedic services. [12568/21]

**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.

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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.

### **Ambulance Service**

760. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health the status of the planned new ambulance station in Ardee, County Louth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12569/21]

**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.

*Question No. 761 answered with Question No. 756.*

### **Home Help Service**

762. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if additional home support services specifically for Sundays will be provided to a person (details supplied) in County Cork. [12572/21]

**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.

### **Disability Services Provision**

763. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health if consideration has been given to providing the Hocoma Lokomat treatment for disabled persons and long-term wheelchair users on social welfare who hold a medical card. [12573/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** The Government is committed to providing services and supports for people with disabilities which will empower them to live independent lives, provide greater independence in accessing the services they choose, and enhance their ability to tailor the supports required to meet their needs and plan their lives.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

764. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the situation faced by Irish citizens who contracted Covid-19 abroad and have recovered from the virus yet are stranded abroad and unable to return here as they cannot produce a not detected PCR test result due to non-infectious viral remnant; if he has considered the way they may return here after having received confirmation from relevant medical officers that they are no longer infectious which may include a period of mandatory quarantine at their own expense in a designated facility upon return; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12589/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Government has introduced more stringent measures applying to international travel in order to mitigate against the risk of new variants being imported through travel and to protect the progress we are making in suppressing transmission domestically.

The Department of Health is aware of residual positive tests in some recovered COVID patients and is examining the issue with public health officials. The issue is common to many countries with travel testing requirements and is also being discussed at EU level.

Under the current mandatory testing regime in Ireland, exemptions from the pre-departure test requirement are in place for international transport workers, passengers travelling with an urgent medical need and for travellers with genuine humanitarian emergencies unable to obtain a pre-departure RT-PCR test before travel.

## **Covid-19 Tests**

765. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to reports of a lack of proper social distancing outside of busy Covid-19 testing centres; the steps his Department is taking to ensure that social distancing is adhered to outside of testing centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12605/21]

**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**

766. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health when school transport escorts will receive the Covid-19 vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12608/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/>.

The roll-out of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there

will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus. The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in front-line services often caring for the most vulnerable.

Vaccination of those aged 70 and older (in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74) 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/>

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.

### **Maternity Services**

767. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 716 of 3 February 2021, the basis on which lactation consultant posts are allocated to community healthcare organisations; the steps his Department is taking to ensure a basic level of this service in each CHO; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12621/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** As this is a service issue the matter has been referred to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

768. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health when indoor visits will be permit-

ted in nursing homes which have been covered in the vaccination programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12623/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** 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 104 nursing homes are actively dealing with a COVID-19 outbreak. Noting that on 6th March approximately 525 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 are finalising this process.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

769. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health the basis on which decisions relating to the number of guests at weddings will be revisited; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12624/21]

954. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health the expected number of persons allowed to attend a wedding in June, July and August 2021 taking into account the increase in vaccines and the expected continued decrease of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13430/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 769 and 954 together.

The public health measures in place at any level of the Government’s updated plan for managing Covid-19 - COVID-19 Resilience & Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead 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.

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 weddings numbers at each level of the COVID-19 Resilience & Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead can be found at Appendix 1 under Social and Family Gatherings/Weddings.

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>

Fáilte Ireland has also 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>

### **Audiology Services**

770. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the timeframe for the waiting list for an audiology appointment at present in the CHO2 region, Galway; and the measures being taken to reduce the waiting times. [12627/21]

**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**

771. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the breakdown on vaccine administration by county. [12634/21]

**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**

772. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if he can confirm reports of needle or syringe shortages in general practice settings which is reportedly delaying vaccine administration. [12635/21]

774. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to instances of delays in vaccine supplies reaching general practitioners which is resulting in general practitioners having to cancel appointments for persons who were due to receive the Covid-19 vaccination. [12637/21]

823. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that general practitioner practices around the country did not have their vaccine orders processed by the HSE and were left without a vaccination; if his attention has been further drawn to the fact that this processing failure is causing great distress for older persons and their families and is undermining confidence in the roll-out of the vaccine; the steps he is taking to address the problem to ensure that these general practitioner practices get their supplies as a matter of urgency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12839/21]

998. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding vaccine allocations to general practitioners for persons over 80 years of age (details supplied). [13536/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 772, 774, 823 and 998 together.

Ireland's strategy is to distribute all COVID-19 vaccines that we receive, subject to ensuring availability of the second dose. At the beginning of last week, Ireland had received approximately 520,000 vaccine doses and by the end of the week approximately 500,000 doses were administered, a measure of the programme's efficiency. Vaccines continue to be administered very quickly after their arrival into the country. At the moment, vaccine administration is limited only by the supply of approved vaccines and that is dependent on manufacturers meeting their supply commitments.

As with all Vaccine Administration Sites, consumables (needles, syringes, sharps bin etc.) are delivered separately to vaccines. Planning is predicated on the approach that consumables will be delivered in advance of the vaccine delivery and every effort is made to ensure that this is the case. However, I am aware of a small number of incidents where consumables have not arrived in advance of the vaccine delivery.

In relation to General Practitioners, the position is that at the conclusion of the first phase roll-out of the programme last weekend, the HSE has confirmed that the majority of patients aged 85 years and over have received their first dose of the vaccine as scheduled. GPs have also begun administration of vaccine to people aged 80-84. In total over 1,300 GP practices, representing in excess of 3,000 GPs and their Practice Teams have delivered over 90,000 vaccines by last weekend and a further 37,000 vaccines being distributed this week (w/c 8 March). The programme has also involved a number of large-scale GP clinics, which have taken place in the Helix DCU, MTU in Cork and Merlin Park Galway with over 1,500 over 85's receiving the vaccine at these locations.

There are a very small number of practices, less than 30, who are due to receive first delivery this week for their over 85s and it is also intended to commence the vaccination of those who

are homebound as arrangements have been put in place in conjunction with GP's, local community teams and the National Ambulance Service and will commence this week and also patients in our acute hospitals. The HSE has acknowledged that there were problems with communication with GPs generally and that some issues have arisen with the distribution of vaccines to some GP practices over the last week, and steps are being taken to improve this situation also.

As is well known, the vaccination programme is limited internationally by the supply of vaccine and our programme to date has ensured that all available vaccine is distributed and administered as quickly as possible. The supply required for the completion of the programme by mid-May remains on target. However, due to a re-profiling of the Moderna vaccine delivery schedule, the total vaccine doses available for distribution in the coming weeks is now slightly less. The available vaccine supply is approximately 15% less than the required amount to meet the total over-80 cohort. This means GPs may not receive the total order for these coming weeks but, in all instances, GPs will be advised on the amounts they will receive and any shortfall in vaccine for the over-80 age group will be allocated in the next order and so on through March with a significant ramp-up in vaccine delivery in April as increased supplies arrive in Ireland. Unfortunately, these supply issues are outside of our control. However, if any additional supply becomes available, this will be provided to General Practitioners at the earliest opportunity. Importantly, the HSE expects that the totality of the over-70s programme will be completed within the original timeframe of mid-May.

### **Vaccination Programme**

**773. Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who have had their Covid-19 vaccine appointments cancelled to date in 2021. [12636/21]

**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. 774 answered with Question No. 772.*

### **Addiction Treatment Services**

**775. Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if there has been an increase in the amount of young person's seeking treatment for drug addiction in County Kildare since the beginning of March 2020; if so, if the HSE has provided additional facilities to deal with any increase; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12652/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly.

### **Departmental Funding**

**776. Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Health the amount of funding his Department has provided to an organisation (details supplied); and if the funding was drawn down under section 38 or 39 funding. [12671/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

### **Drugs Payment Scheme**

777. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the reason the drug semaglutide has been removed from the drugs payment scheme for use by polycystic ovary syndrome patients; his plans to reinstate it; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12672/21]

778. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the reason semaglutide has been removed from the drugs payment scheme for use by polycystic ovary syndrome patients; if he plans to reinstate the drug on the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12674/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 777 and 778 together.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Drugs Payment Scheme**

779. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health if drugs for the treatment of hyperemesis gravidarum are being considered for the drugs payment scheme or medical card; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12677/21]

**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.

### **Charitable and Voluntary Organisations**

780. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Health the way in which a person (details supplied) in County Tipperary can obtain permission to complete a charity run from Mizen to Malin Head; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12680/21]

**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 23rd February, 2021, the Government published its updated plan for managing Covid-19 - COVID-19 Resilience & Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead. This three part plan reviews the learnings from our experience to date, considers the enormous impacts our efforts to manage and suppress the disease have had on our economy and on our society and sets out a cautious and measured approach to the easing of restrictions over the coming months.

The public health measures in place at any level of the Plan 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.

Under the current restrictions 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 5km of home. Further information is available here - [www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/#travel-restrictions](http://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, as amended by S.I. No. 4 of 2021, S.I. No. 29 of 2021 and S.I. No. 95 of 2021, sets out the current public health restrictions at level 5.

Statutory Instruments relating to the Covid pandemic are available here: [www.gov.ie/en/collection/1f150-view-statutory-instruments-related-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/1f150-view-statutory-instruments-related-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/).

## Health Services

781. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the rationale behind the HSE decision to suspend services at a service (details supplied) in County Dublin; when these services will resume; the alternative services in place for persons in County Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12681/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The Gay Men’s Health Service is a community STI service and is managed through HSE Community Healthcare East (CHO6).

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented interruption to normal healthcare activity, with all services affected. In 2021, all health services continue to face restrictions, as the health system continues to need to prioritise treating those with COVID-19 and rolling out the vaccination programme.

The closure of the GMHS in 2020 related primarily to the necessary redeployment of increasing numbers of personnel to diverse COVID-19 related duties. During the interval in which the GMHS was closed, significant efforts were made to maintain service provision by referring patients to alternative services in Dublin.

Currently, CHO6 are continuing to work to reopen the GMHS on a phased basis. The recruitment of permanent staff is progressing with administration staff in post and IT expansion underway.

Existing PrEP users are now being seen in the GMHS. The Clinic’s Consultant in Infectious Diseases (Gay Men’s Health service (GMHS) and GUIDE Clinic, St James’s Hospital) and other doctors are providing virtual consultations. PrEP service users attend GMHS for STI screening and blood testing. Those with diagnosed STIs or requiring Hepatitis and/or HPV vaccination continue to be treated in GMHS also.

In summary, a phased reintroduction of STI services is currently under way in GMHS. All services are being and will continue to be delivered in accordance with current Public Health COVID guidelines. Officials from the Department of Health and the HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme are in regular contact with CHO6 to monitor progress regarding the phased reopening of the GMHS.

It should also be noted that phone lines, the GMHS website and other resources such as

[www.man2man.ie](http://www.man2man.ie) and [www.sexualwellbeing.ie](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie) are regularly updated to reflect current service delivery and to signpost users to the HSE list of approved STI and PrEP services.

### **Sexually Transmitted Infections**

782. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the HIV and STI public testing services that are currently in operation under level 5 Covid-19 restrictions in County Dublin; his plans to restore services which have been suspended due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12682/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented interruptions to normal healthcare activity, with all services affected. In 2021, all health services continue to face restrictions, as the health system continues to need to prioritise testing, contact tracing and treating those with COVID-19 and rolling out the vaccination programme.

With regard to sexual health services, phone lines, the GMHS website and other resources such as [www.man2man.ie](http://www.man2man.ie) and [www.sexualwellbeing.ie](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie) are regularly updated to reflect current service delivery and to signpost users to the HSE list of approved STI and PrEP services.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Provision**

783. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health his plans to address the Covid-19-related challenges faced in delivering both clinical and community-based sexual health services in County Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12683/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented interruptions to normal healthcare activity, with all services affected. In 2021, all health services continue to face restrictions, as the health system continues to need to prioritise testing, contact tracing, treating those with COVID-19 and rolling out the vaccination programme.

With regard to sexual health services, phone lines, the GMHS website and other resources such as [www.man2man.ie](http://www.man2man.ie) and [www.sexualwellbeing.ie](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie) are regularly updated to reflect current service delivery and to signpost users to the HSE list of approved STI and PrEP services.

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**

784. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health his plans to facilitate the vaccination of those who due to medical conditions are housebound or do not have anyone available to bring them to their general practitioner or vaccination centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12686/21]

**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**

785. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the value to each hospital of the car parking charges system in tabular form; the amount raised from car parking charges if the system is under hospital control; and the amount made in payment from a private operator if the system is privatised. [12687/21]

**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**

786. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the status of car parking charges systems in each hospital which are run by the hospitals and private companies; the status of the contractual agreement with the private companies; and when these contracts lapse. [12688/21]

**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**

787. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health if he has considered abolishing car parking fees for cancer patients in hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12689/21]

**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.

### **HSE Expenditure**

788. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the cost the HSE pays for debt collection services for non or late payments of hospital fees. [12690/21]

**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.

### **Hospital Car Parks**

789. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the amount collected in parking charges at Children's Health Ireland, Crumlin in each of the years of 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [12706/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Suicide Prevention**

790. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health if he will examine the roll-out of age-appropriate Safe Talk training for pupils in secondary schools. [12710/21]

**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**

791. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if he will review correspondence from a person (details supplied); if he will address the concerns raised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12713/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** All day service locations with the exception of those being utilised as COVID-19 isolation or testing centres have reopened since August. Service users that usually received their supports from these locations are now either receiving supports at another location or receiving outreach or home-based supports.

Day services re-opened at 39% capacity at service locations throughout August and early September of 2020, and by end of January 2021 this had increased to 51%. The combination of supports in the location, outreach supports, and remote supports provides an overall quantum

of support to service users of over 60% at the end of January. For the duration of the COVID-19 emergency day service capacity is reduced, this is due to the physical limitations of the buildings available, the lack of mainstream community activities, and the continued restrictions imposed by social distancing guidance. Many people with disabilities have underlying health conditions, and as the threat of COVID-19 remains, unfortunately so too does the need for these restrictions.

Guidance published by the HSE on 6 January 2021 confirms that day services continue to be prioritised and delivered subject to a revised Risk Assessment, Public Health Guidance and direction. People with complex medical/ clinical related needs are to remain at home and where possible, to receive the same number of hours support in the home as they had been in receipt of pre-Christmas in day service locations. Providers have been asked to reduce contacts via hubs/ bubbles, with dedicated staff for dedicated service users, where possible. Where families are uncomfortable with allowing their family member to return to a day service location, a package of support within available resources will be agreed with the service user and family.

Additional funding of €30 million has been provided in Budget 2021 for day services to increase capacity in buildings and provide extra staff. This will provide an increase in day services by an average of one day a week for 14,940 people against September 2020 service levels.

With regard to the COVID 19 vaccine, the COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and the Department of Health, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for the Minister for Health and further information is available here: [www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/](http://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, Stephen Donnelly TD, Minister for Health 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/](http://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/).

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 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.

As the question also pertains to a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly in relation to the individual case, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Procedures**

792. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health the number of tricuspid valve replacement procedures carried out at St. James's Hospital in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [12715/21]

**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.

### **Healthcare Infrastructure Provision**

793. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health the capital works that were carried out at National Orthopaedic Hospital Cappagh in each of the years 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the estimated cost of each project; and the duration of each of the capital works projects in tabular form. [12716/21]

**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.

### **Home Care Packages**

794. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in County Meath seeking an intensive home care package. [12717/21]

**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.

### **Health Services Staff**

795. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health the number of consultant

cardiothoracic surgeon posts that have been advertised since 2016; and the number of these posts that have been filled to date. [12718/21]

**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.

### **Disability Support Services**

796. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the reason a person (details supplied) cannot attend a centre; when such centres will reopen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12731/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** All day service locations with the exception of those being utilised as COVID-19 isolation or testing centres have reopened since August. Service users that usually received their supports from these locations are now either receiving supports at another location or receiving outreach or home-based supports.

Day services re-opened at 39% capacity at service locations throughout August and early September of 2020, and by end of January 2021 this had increased to 51%. The combination of supports in the location, outreach supports, and remote supports provides an overall quantum of support to service users of over 60% at the end of January. For the duration of the COVID-19 emergency day service capacity is reduced, this is due to the physical limitations of the buildings available, the lack of mainstream community activities, and the continued restrictions imposed by social distancing guidance. Many people with disabilities have underlying health conditions, and as the threat of COVID-19 remains, unfortunately so too does the need for these restrictions.

Guidance published by the HSE on 6 January 2021 confirms that day services continue to be prioritised and delivered subject to a revised Risk Assessment, Public Health Guidance and direction. People with complex medical/ clinical related needs are to remain at home and where possible, to receive the same number of hours support in the home as they had been in receipt of pre-Christmas in day service locations. Providers have been asked to reduce contacts via hubs/ bubbles, with dedicated staff for dedicated service users, where possible. Where families are uncomfortable with allowing their family member to return to a day service location, a package of support within available resources will be agreed with the service user and family.

Additional funding of €30 million has been provided in Budget 2021 for day services to increase capacity in buildings and provide extra staff. This will provide an increase in day services by an average of one day a week for 14,940 people against September 2020 service levels.

As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly in relation to the individual case, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Services**

797. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the status of the paediatric diabetes service in the Regional Hospital, Mullingar (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12732/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Ambulance Service

798. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the provision of ambulance services for the Connemara region, particularly in view of an incident (details supplied); the number of ambulances currently serving the Connemara region; the locations from which these ambulances are dispatched when requested; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12733/21]

**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 Staff

799. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the process through which a formal grievance submission by a staff member of the HSE can be made to a manager; the responsibility on the HSE manager to arrange a grievance hearing; the recourse a member of staff has if a grievance hearing is not arranged; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12735/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I note that the HSE have publicly published their Grievance Policy which is available to view at the link below, however I have also asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter. [www.hse.ie/eng/staff/resources/hrppg/grievance-and-disciplinary-procedure-for-the-health-service-2004.html](http://www.hse.ie/eng/staff/resources/hrppg/grievance-and-disciplinary-procedure-for-the-health-service-2004.html).

### Vaccination Programme

800. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the capacity available to administer the Covid-19 vaccine as one million doses per month are received; and if there is a contingency plan to scale up capacity if more doses become available. [12739/21]

**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

801. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Health his views on the Austrian led First-Movers vaccination group. [12740/21]

**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.

Government approval has been obtained to opt-into a sixth, but this is conditional on certain trial progression criteria being met.

Ireland has opted-in to pro rata allocation of BioNTech / Pfizer and Moderna vaccines. Ireland has also secured additional doses of the BioNTech / Pfizer vaccine via options and top up contracts, which will bring the current total of BioNTech / Pfizer doses secured to approximately 6.5 million doses. Ireland has also signalled interest in obtaining 1.64 million additional

doses of the Moderna vaccine. Ireland now expects to receive a total of 1.1 million doses of the three approved vaccines (Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, AstraZeneca) from the start of the vaccination programme to the end of March.

Ireland has 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 Provision**

802. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if medical consultations in the public system have become virtual consultations; and if it is planned to continue this practice beyond the pandemic. [12741/21]

**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 HSE continues to identify ways to improve access to care, for example through modified pathways to care in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the use of telemedicine, private hospitals, community facilities and atypical outpatient settings.

The work of the HSE to improve access to elective care and reduce waiting times for patients is supported by the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF), who in 2020 reviewed strategies to maximise activity and benefit for patients. This included increased use of private hospitals, funding weekend and evening work in public hospitals, funding “see and treat” services where minor procedures are provided at the same time as outpatient consultations, funding hybrid services where public and private hospitals contribute to the treatment of patients, virtual clinics and clinical validation.

Innovative use of technology benefited Outpatient appointments in 2020 and between March and December 2020, more than 650,000 patients attended a virtual outpatient appointment.

In relation to the specific query raised regarding current levels of virtual consultation in the public system and plans to continue this practice beyond the pandemic, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Vaccination Programme**

803. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health when ninety persons in the over-85 years of age category who had appointments for Covid-19 vaccination cancelled without notice in Ballyfermot recently will receive vaccinations; if his attention has been drawn to the distress

and confusion this has caused to the older persons that have been waiting patiently for their vaccinations and stuck rigidly to the public health restrictions for almost a year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12760/21]

**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 Staff**

804. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Health his plans to deal with the issue of pay awards arising from Report No. 42 of the Review Body of Higher Remuneration in Public Service regarding payment being withheld from serving and retired HSE senior managers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12766/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** You may be aware that the new Public Service Agreement 2021 - 2022 was recently ratified by the parties. I understand that the issue of Report No. 42 is a matter that may be suitable for prioritising in the context of the sectoral bargaining process that is provided for within that agreement. It will be a matter for the parties to the agreement to decide what issues they wish to prioritise for advancement within that process.

### **Vaccination Programme**

805. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health when the Covid-19 vaccinations will commence for the over-65 years of age group given the anxiety of so many persons to be vaccinated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12789/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: [www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/](http://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.

Vaccination of those aged 70 and older (in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74) began in February.

10 March 2021

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/](http://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/).

### **Vaccination Programme**

806. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the status of a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied) with regard to vaccinations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12790/21]

**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**

807. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Health the status of a paediatric diabetes nurse in Mullingar General Hospital; and when this service will resume. [12791/21]

**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 Data**

808. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who availed of the cross-border health directive in Northern Ireland in each of the years, 2016 to 2020, and to date in 2021, in tabular form; the category of the procedures; the diagnosis-related group codes involved; and the payment made in each case. [12796/21]

**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**

809. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a hospital

appointment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12802/21]

**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**

810. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health if those who were absent from school on the day of the human papillomavirus, HPV, vaccine administration and the catch-up programme can still receive the HPV vaccine free of charge (details supplied). [12807/21]

**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 to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Vaccination Programme**

811. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health if persons with underlying health conditions who are now to get higher priority in access to vaccines will be selected based on specific categories of condition or selected by general practitioners based on assessed vulnerability; and if younger persons for whom most of the vaccines have not been explicitly approved will be prioritised for protection. [12809/21]

**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/](http://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.

Vaccination of those aged 70 and older (in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74) 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: [www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnolly-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/](http://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnolly-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/).

In relation to the categories of very high risk and high risk conditions, this list is not exhaustive. It may also include people who have been classed as at very high risk, based on clinical judgement and an assessment of need. It is recommended that the individuals concerned discuss this with their treating physician who is in the best position to give appropriate advice.

### **Nursing Homes Support Scheme**

812. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the expected timeframe for the policy changes to the nursing homes support scheme to cap the financial assessment of family farms or businesses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12810/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** The Nursing Homes Support Scheme, commonly referred to as the *Fair Deal Scheme*, has been in operation for over 10 years and there is broad agreement that the Scheme operates well and continues to provide appropriate financial assistance where it is required.

However, it is recognised that the Act, in its current form, does not place caps on the financial assessment of family owned and operated farms or businesses when calculating the means to pay for nursing home care. This places a potentially onerous burden on family successors and could challenge the future viability of these productive assets.

Therefore, the Department of Health has proposed a policy change to the Scheme, to cap contributions based on farm and business assets at three years where a family successor commits to working the productive asset. The stated policy objective of the legislation is to introduce additional safeguards in the Scheme to further protect the viability and sustainability of family farms and businesses that will be passed down to the next generation of the family to continue to work them as productive assets to provide for their livelihood.

This change was approved by Government and underwent pre-legislative scrutiny in the last Dáil. Progress on the development of the Bill was negatively impacted by the dissolution of the last Dáil and by the COVID-19 pandemic. The response to the pandemic has been and continues to be a national and public health priority. However, work on this legislation has continued to progress. I requested a waiver to conduct pre-legislative scrutiny from the Business Committee, given this was already undertaken in the previous Dáil, and this waiver was granted on 4th February 2021. I have met with the Attorney General to discuss this legislation, and there has been an ongoing and active engagement between the Department of Health and the Office of the Attorney General on the development of the legislation, which will be brought to the Houses

of the Oireachtas at the earliest possible opportunity. It is on the priority list for publication in the Spring legislative session. The Bill will be enacted upon completion of all stages in the Oireachtas and signed into law by the President.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

813. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health if aesthetic clinics are permitted to open during level 5 restrictions; the guidelines in place for the operation of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12815/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The public health restrictions 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 23rd February, 2021, the Government published the revised plan: Covid 19 Resilience & Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead. This three part plan reviews the learnings from our experience to date, considers the enormous impacts our efforts to manage and suppress the disease have had on our economy and on our society and sets out a cautious and measured approach to the easing of restrictions over the coming months.

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/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c4876-covid-19-resilience-and-recovery-2021-the-path-ahead/?referrer=http://www.gov.ie/ThePathAhead/).

The Regulations in effect providing for the current public health restrictions are the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 10) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 701 of 2020) as amended by both S.I. No. 4 of 2021 and S.I. No. 29 of 2021. Part 2 of the Principal Regulations sets out what are essential services, including at 15. (h) “primary care and general and specialist medical practice activities;”

The Deputy should note that aesthetic clinics providing aesthetic treatments for cosmetic purposes are not considered essential at this time.

Information in relation to the public health measures in place at level 5 is available at: [www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/).

### **Vaccination Programme**

814. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if the recommendation that a vaccine (details supplied) should not be used on persons over 70 years of age will be reassessed given the recent Public Health England real-world study on the effectiveness of the vaccine. [12817/21]

**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:

The NIAC continues to review all emerging evidence relating to the use of Covid-19 vaccines in Ireland.

### **Vaccination Programme**

815. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide details of the way the Covid vaccines are distributed to general practitioners such as by county or surgery; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that a number of surgeries have not yet received a delivery; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12818/21]

**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**

816. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to reopen the gender identity adolescent service in Our Lady's Children's Hospital to new referrals; his plans to improve access to healthcare for young transgender persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12821/21]

817. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the progress on his plans to develop national gender clinics and multidisciplinary teams for transgender children and adults; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12822/21]

818. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the progress on his plans to create and implement a general health policy for transgender persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12823/21]

832. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to develop a service user forum for the national gender service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12858/21]

833. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to provide gender identity skills training to all relevant staff members across the continuum of care through primary, secondary and tertiary care; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12860/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 816 to 818, inclusive, 832 and 833 together.

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**

819. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 441 of 10 December 2020, if he will clarify the definition of currently registered on the national pre-exposure prophylaxis, PrEP, programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12834/21]

820. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons registered on the national PrEP programme; the number who are currently using PrEP; the number of prescriptions for PrEP written in the past three months for persons registered on the programme; the number of prescriptions for PrEP written in the past six months for persons registered on the programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12835/21]

821. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the period that registration is counted as current for the PrEP programme; the reason that a registration would no longer be counted as current for persons who are registered on the national PrEP programme; the actions that are required to extend a current registration; the actions that are required to renew a registration that is no longer current; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12836/21]

822. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons counted as currently registered on the national PrEP programme; the number of persons newly registered on the programme from October 2019 to date, by month, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12837/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 819 to 822, inclusive, together.

The roll-out of the national PrEP programme was a significant landmark in the implementation of the *National Sexual Health Strategy, 2015-2020*. The PrEP programme was launched in November 2019 and funding of €5.4 million was secured in 2020, including allocations for the recruitment of additional staff. The roll-out of the programme continues in 2021. Whilst the PrEP programme remains fully funded, implementation has been impacted as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

All health services, including STI/HIV/PrEP services, are continuing to face constraints, resulting from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. These include attendance by appointment only, or online as a result of the need to maintain social distancing, and the necessary redeployment of personnel to diverse COVID-19 related duties, which include testing, contact tracing, vaccination and front-line patient care.

However, despite Covid-19 related restrictions, the national PrEP programme has continued to expand and over 2,000 individuals, mostly gay men, are currently registered.

Phone lines, the GMHS website and other resources such as [www.man2man.ie](http://www.man2man.ie) and [www.sexualwellbeing.ie](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie) are regularly updated to reflect current service delivery and to signpost users to the HSE list of approved PrEP services.

Needless to say, funding remains in place for the national PrEP programme and it is hoped that this service can be delivered to its full potential and developed further, once pandemic related constraints on the health service as a whole can be reduced safely.

With regard to the detailed statistical data sought, 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. 823 answered with Question No. 772.*

## **Health Services**

824. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to develop national gender clinics and multidisciplinary teams for transgender children and adults; and if he will

make a statement on the matter. [12842/21]

825. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to create and implement a general health policy for transgender persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12843/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 824 and 825 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**

826. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Health the process established to deal with difficult cases concerning the Covid-19 vaccination, in particular a case (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12845/21]

**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/](http://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.

Vaccination of those aged 70 and older (in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74) 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 ef-

fectiveness 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/](http://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/)

### **Vaccination Programme**

827. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will receive the Covid-19 vaccine in view of the high risk of getting the virus in the hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12846/21]

**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 Provision**

828. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the existing treatments that are being provided for amyloidosis patients; the way in which these compare against patrisan; and the efficacy of these existing treatments in stopping the progression of amyloidosis. [12848/21]

**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 Services Provision**

829. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the closure of St. Joseph's Rehabilitation Unit, Castlebar; the rehabilitation services that are available to replace those that cannot be accessed as a result of the closure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12849/21]

**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.

### **Vaccination Programme**

830. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health when international transport workers can expect to receive a vaccine; and if he has been in contact with his European counterparts concerning vaccinations for this cohort of workers who travel across many European states on a weekly basis. [12850/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: [www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/](http://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.

Vaccination of those aged 70 and older (in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74) 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: [www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/](http://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**

831. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health the procedure in place for those who require mobile vaccinations from their home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12853/21]

**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. 832 and 833 answered with Question No. 816.*

### **Alcohol Pricing**

834. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health when the minimum unit pricing for alcohol under the Public Health (Alcohol) Act 2018 will be implemented in view of the pressing need to tackle alcohol abuse and dependence and the growing nature of binge drinking in the home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12864/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The 2013 Government Decision which approved the introduction of minimum unit pricing in Ireland agreed to its implementation on that basis that it would be introduced here and in Northern Ireland simultaneously. This was to allay concerns that its introduction in one jurisdiction only would impact negatively on cross-border trade. Northern Ireland Health Minister Robin Swann has committed to a public consultation on the introduction of minimum pricing for alcohol in Northern Ireland.

### **Ministerial Meetings**

835. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide a report on his meeting with EU Health Ministers on 1 March 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12870/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I met with my EU counterparts via videoconference on the morning of 1 March 2021 for an informal meeting of EU Health Ministers, convened by the Portuguese Presidency of the Council of the European Union.

The meeting was chaired from Lisbon by Portuguese Minister for Health Marta Temido. I led the Irish delegation. The European Commission was represented by Commission Vice-President for Promoting our European Way of Life, Margaritis Schinas, and Commissioner for Health and Food Safety, Stella Kyriakides. Director of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) Andrea Ammon and Executive Director of the European Medicines Agency (EMA) Emer Cooke also attended the meeting and made presentations before EU and EFTA Member States each made an intervention.

The discussion focussed on the impact of variants on Member States, national testing strategies, and the need for information sharing on the national rollout of COVID-19 vaccination plans.

During my intervention, I shared Ireland's experience of its testing strategy and exploration of advanced technologies which when guided by scientific evidence will inform the future testing service. I voiced Ireland's support for the objectives of the proposed HERA Incubator, the precursor to the establishment of the European Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA), as well as efforts to increase information-sharing on vaccination rollout and lessons learnt across Member States.

### **Paediatric Services**

836. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if the necessary resources will be provided to reduce unacceptable waiting times for paediatric occupational therapy in counties Cavan and Monaghan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12871/21]

**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.

### **Medical Aids and Appliances**

837. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health the most recent figure for the number of persons waiting for motorised wheelchairs in community healthcare organisation area 4. [12872/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Medical Aids and Appliances**

838. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health the breakdown of annual funding for the provision of motorised wheelchairs; the model for the allocation of same; and his plans for future funding. [12873/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Medical Aids and Appliances**

839. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Health the average waiting times for the assessment and approval of provision of motorised wheelchairs; and the average length of time it takes to deliver a wheelchair to the applicant. [12874/21]

**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**

840. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the oversight and complaint mechanism available to families for reporting non-compliance with nursing home visiting guidelines during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12879/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I would like to thank the Deputy for highlighting this issue.

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.

Registered providers, (public, voluntary and private) are obliged to provide an accessible and effective complaints procedure. The Office of the Ombudsman can examine complaints about the actions of a range of public bodies and, from 24 August 2015, complaints relating to the administrative actions of private nursing homes. The Office of the Ombudsman normally only deals with a complaint once the individual has already gone through the complaint's procedure of the private nursing home concerned.

The Ombudsman may be contacted at:

Office of the Ombudsman, 18 Lower Leeson Street, Dublin 2, Tel. (01) 639 5600 / Lo-call (1890) 22 30 30 and via e-mail at [ombudsman@ombudsman.gov.ie](mailto:ombudsman@ombudsman.gov.ie) (website is [www.ombudsman.ie](http://www.ombudsman.ie)).

Separately, the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) welcomes information about designated centres for dependent persons, reviews all information about services received and evaluates it against the regulations and standards.

Concerns can be communicated to:

Phone: 021 240 9646

E-mail: [concerns@hiqa.ie](mailto:concerns@hiqa.ie)

Postal Address: HIQA, George's Court, Smithfield, Dublin 7, D07 E98Y

As a regulator HIQA has no legal role in examining individual complaints, however, the Authority does take into account all information it receives, including complaints from the public, when carrying out inspections and this range of information informs a risk-based approach to regulation.

### **Vaccination Programme**

841. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the measures he is taking to ensure organisation of times for vaccinations for front-line healthcare workers and the communication of these details to workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12880/21]

**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**

842. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health the reason Covid-19 vaccinations for persons over 85 years of age in north County Kildare are being cancelled, in some instances twice; when the vaccine will be available to this cohort in the area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12882/21]

**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**

843. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide details of the evidence or data to support conclusions by a person (details supplied) that the immunotherapy drug pembrolizumab does nothing for seven out of eight women with cervical cancer, in view of a recent newspaper article (details supplied). [12884/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drug schemes, in

accordance with the provisions of the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013; therefore, the matter has been referred to the HSE for reply to the Deputy.

### Health Services

844. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of the national survey on drug and alcohol use in Ireland conducted by the Health Research Board. [12935/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The national survey on drug and alcohol use is a general population survey of households in Ireland to measure the extent and pattern of drug use (including alcohol and tobacco) among a representative sample of those aged 15 and over in Ireland.

The survey is carried out according to standards set by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. The target sample size is c 7,000 people. Details of the methodology can be found in the technical report.

The Health Research Board (HRB) is responsible for conducting the 2019/2020 survey. It has engaged a third party survey company to perform tasks including the sampling and recruitment of survey respondents, data collection (interviews with the respondents in their own home) and an initial analysis of the dataset. The fee paid to the third party is €706,850 (including VAT).

The final dataset was supplied to the HRB in September 2020, and it is expected that the report on the survey will be published in the 2nd quarter of 2021.

### Vaccination Programme

845. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health the reason for the change in the target for vaccination of the over 85s within his daily update to Deputies (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12936/21]

**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

846. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health the reason two members of the same family (details supplied), both in their 80s, are receiving vaccinations at different times; if his attention has been drawn to the immense sacrifice and stringent compliance with public health advice older persons have made; the steps he will take to rectify the inconsistent and irregular delivery of vaccines within localities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12938/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Eating Disorders

847. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health his views on a report by a group (details supplied) in relation to recovery from eating disorders Ireland that states that lack of

proper treatment for persons with eating disorders is leaving sufferers misunderstood, abandoned, isolated and lost; and if a comprehensive eating disorder service will be delivered. [12939/21]

**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.

### **Hospital Procedures**

848. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will receive a date for surgery; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12941/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted in the last year as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The HSE is currently recommending that only critical time dependent elective procedures are undertaken at this time due to the on-going and significant increased demand for bed capacity related to Covid-19.

This decision was made arising from the rapid increase in Covid-19 admissions and to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work.

Patient safety remains at the centre of all hospital activity and elective care scheduling. To ensure services are provided in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols.

Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

849. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health if the new package of increased supports and respite for a child (details supplied) has been completed; if so, if it has been shared with him and the family of the child; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12944/21]

**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

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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.

### Medical Cards

850. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the reason the medical card issued to a person (details supplied) was revoked without notification; if the card will be restored at least until there is sufficient time to reapply; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12946/21]

**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 Internships

851. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under his aegis in 2019; the cost in terms of wages and allowances; and the estimated numerical capacity of State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis. [12957/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter. In relation to the Non-Commercial State Agencies under the aegis of my Department, this information has been sought, and once collated, will be provided to the Deputy by way of separate letter.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

852. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider amending Covid-19 regulations to designate the monumental masonry sector which deals with the provision and maintenance of headstones in cemeteries (details supplied); if the sector can operate under existing regulations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12967/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy is aware, the public health restrictions at level 5 of the Government's Framework Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19 will remain in place until 5th April 2021, when a further review will be conducted. The Framework continues to provide an appropriate mechanism to guide decision-making, and it will continue to be supplemented by more detailed sectoral guidance in relation to measures that apply at each level of the Framework.

On 23rd February, 2021, the Government published the revised plan: Covid 19 Resilience & Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead. This three part plan reviews the learnings from our experience to date, considers the enormous impacts our efforts to manage and suppress the disease have had on our economy and on our society and sets out a cautious and measured approach to the easing of restrictions over the coming months.

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/](http://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: [www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/) and [www.gov.ie/en/publication/c9158-essential-services/](http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c9158-essential-services/) Funeral and burial 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: [www.gov.ie/en/collection/1f150-view-statutory-instruments-related-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/1f150-view-statutory-instruments-related-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/) .

### **Vaccination Programme**

853. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health if he will request the HSE to provide contact information and details regarding its vaccination service for persons who are housebound; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12968/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Drugs Payment Scheme**

854. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health the reason ozempic, also known as semaglutide, was taken off the drug payment scheme for all non-type 2 diabetic patients in July 2020 in circular 022/20; his plans to reinstate it on the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12969/21]

**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**

855. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health the sequence of dentists and dental staff in the national vaccine programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12970/21]

**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

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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/](http://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.

Vaccination of those aged 70 and older (in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74) 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/](http://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnolly-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.

### **Health Services Staff**

856. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health if he will include dentists and hygienists in the Be on Call for Ireland initiative, given that they deal with medical emergencies and have the required training to deal with such emergencies including the administration of adrenaline for anaphylaxis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12971/21]

**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 Treatment Purchase Fund**

857. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the breakdown of the NTPF suspended outpatients list; the number of patients waiting; the length of the wait and speciality of consultant they are waiting to see; if children are included in this suspended outpatients list; the number of children currently on a suspended outpatients list; if all patients have been informed that they have been moved to a suspended outpatients list; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12972/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** To ensure standardised waiting list management, the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) and HSE issued guidance to the acute hospital system outlining the details of outpatient suspensions on 8th December 2020, in line with the Inpatient, Daycase and Planned Procedure (IDPP) Waiting List Management Protocol 2017.

In accordance with these guidelines, patients on an outpatient waiting list should be suspended if they accept an invitation to access hospital care through the NTPF commissioning process or HSE outsourcing. Importantly, the suspension of an outpatient does not incur a ‘stop-start’ in wait time, and thus does not impact on the patient’s wait time.

The NTPF have advised my Department that as the Outpatient Waiting List Protocol has only recently been amended for outpatient suspensions, they are not in a position to provide the information requested by the Deputy until after the February waiting list figures are published on Friday 12th March 2021.

### **HSE Waiting Lists**

858. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of children currently waiting on a first outpatients appointment with a specialist consultant in the HSE, to include all hospitals not just children waiting to see a consultant in CHI; the length of the wait; the speciality they are waiting to see; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12973/21]

**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 HSE continues to optimise productivity through alternative work practices such as the

use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative outpatient settings.

In addition the National Treatment Purchas Fund (NTPF) is currently reviewing strategies to maximise activity and benefit for patients, to include, increased use of private hospitals , funding weekend and evening work in public hospitals, funding “ see and treat” services where minor procedures are provided at the same time outpatient consultations, funding hybrid services where public and private hospitals contribute to the treatment of patients, virtual clinics, and clinical validation.

€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. This will be used 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 National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

The data requested by the Deputy has been provided to my Department by the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) and is outlined in the attached document. This document provides a breakdown of the Outpatient waiting lists for children, by Specialty and the numbers waiting in each time-band as of the end of January 2021.

#### Child OP Waiting List Per Speciality at 28/01/2021

-	0-3 Months	3-6 Months	6-9 Months	9-12 Months	12-15 Months	15-18 Months	18 Months +	Grand Total
Breast Surgery	7	5		7				19
Cardiology	36	20	19	25	9	7	12	128
Cardio-Thoracic Surgery	53	27	19	12	8		7	126
Child/Adolescent Psychiatry	27				5			32
Clinical (Medical) Genetics	204	194	135	177	195	168	828	1,901
Clinical Immunology	171	88	45	78	128	119	1,062	1,691
Clinical Neurophysiology			11	11	5			27
Dental Surgery	65	43	29	72	70	41	155	475
Dermatology	671	463	297	321	274	250	937	3,213
Developmental Paediatrics	93	63	33	78	55	97	476	895
Endocrinology	6							6
Gastro-Enterology	6							6
General Medicine	18	9						27
General Surgery	515	405	225	207	128	126	198	1,804

*Questions - Written Answers*

-	0-3 Months	3-6 Months	6-9 Months	9-12 Months	12-15 Months	15-18 Months	18 Months +	Grand Total
Gynaecology	197	116	57	51	29	12	14	476
Haematology	37	27	10	7				81
Immunology	63	40	13	33	36	53	300	538
Maxillo-Facial	56	36	17	26	29	23	130	317
Neonatology	9	5						14
Neurology	15	9		7				31
Neurosurgery	8							8
Ophthalmology	1,381	844	457	620	562	435	2,853	7,152
Oral Surgery	45	20	8	18	21	27	61	200
Orthopaedics	662	505	274	287	239	187	440	2,594
Otolaryngology (ENT)	1,191	875	544	1,143	1,174	874	6,728	12,529
Paed Cardiology	913	709	470	380	215	190	268	3,145
Paed Endocrinology	241	150	69	82	103	83	71	799
Paed Gastro-Enterol	268	154	62	79	64	70	549	1,246
Paed Haematology	71	57	31	36	13	5	19	232
Paed Metabolic Medicine	32	24	5					61
Paed Nephrology	173	112	61	51	27	31	48	503
Paed Orthopaedic	685	635	410	445	423	404	1,288	4,290
Paediatric Anaesthetics	13	5	7			8	48	81
Paediatric Dermatology	716	517	343	327	319	360	2,426	5,008
Paediatric ENT	728	559	334	714	820	674	2,164	5,993
Paediatric Infectious Diseases	31	18	30	14	27	6	6	132
Paediatric Neurology	416	172	55	77	107	58	252	1,137
Paediatric Neurosurgery	26						7	33
Paediatric Respiratory Medicine	230	164	136	255	236	199	854	2,074
Paediatric Surgery	1,068	879	558	431	352	333	467	4,088
Paediatric Urology	207	172	106	114	151	81	364	1,195
Paediatrics	5,248	2,835	1,348	1,113	754	331	613	12,242
Pain Relief	9	9	5		7			30
Plastic Surgery	380	280	213	229	289	222	470	2,083
Respiratory Medicine							7	7

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-	0-3 Months	3-6 Months	6-9 Months	9-12 Months	12-15 Months	15-18 Months	18 Months +	Grand Total
Rheumatology	129	97	58	83	81	72	756	1,276
Small Vol Specialties	11	24	35	19	20	15	18	142
Urology	424	349	252	250	252	236	691	2,454
Vascular Surgery	9	5						14
Grand Total	17,564	11,720	6,781	7,879	7,227	5,797	25,587	82,555

\*Due to the small volume of patients waiting in certain specialties, to preserve patient confidentiality, when the number of patients is <5, these have been included within broader time-bands or aggregated into a 'Small Volume Specialties' cohort.

### HSE Waiting Lists

859. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when the HSE will establish child specific wait lists as per a recommendation of the Ombudsman for Children in 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12974/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) is a corporate body with functions and responsibilities as set out under Statutory Instrument 179 - National Treatment Purchase Fund (Establishment) Order, 2004. One of functions of the NTPF Board is to collect, collate and validate information in relation to persons waiting for hospital treatment in acute public hospitals in Ireland.

The NTPF has advised my Department that work is underway on the separation of adult and child waiting lists for inpatient, day case and outpatient waiting lists in public hospitals. The associated Statistical Disclosure Control (SDC) issues that arise from this work have presented a number of significant challenges which delayed the project to date.

However, the NTPF has advised that they plan to include Paediatric Waiting lists in the publication of the March 2021 waiting list figures.

### HSE Waiting Lists

860. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when the HSE will establish target outpatient wait times for children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12975/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE Management Data Report (MDR) reports on HSE activity against Key Performance Indicators as set out in the National Service Plan for 2021. Under the National Service Plan 2021, the target for all hospital groups is for 75% of people, including children, to wait less than 52 weeks for a first Outpatient Department appointment.

The Department oversees the performance of the HSE in relation to the delivery of the services set out in its National Service Plan. This is achieved through an on-going monthly performance management process where the HSE reports against the targets set out in the Service Plan. Monthly high-level meetings between management in both organisations are held to discuss on-going or emerging performance issues and to determine actions to resolve and improve

areas of concern. There is also regular engagement between HSE and departmental officials on a wide range of issues to ensure compliance with policy objectives.

Outpatient waiting list information has been collected and published by the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) since 2013. The data represents those waiting for a first appointment at a consultant-led Outpatient clinic. The Outpatient Waiting List report shows the total number of patients waiting, across the various time bands, for a first appointment at a consultant-led Outpatient clinic

The NTPF has advised my Department that work is underway on the separation of adult and child waiting lists for inpatient, day case and outpatient waiting lists in public hospitals. The associated Statistical Disclosure Control (SDC) issues that arise from this work have presented a number of significant challenges which delayed the project to date. However, the NTPF has advised that they plan to include Paediatric Waiting lists in the publication of the March 2021 waiting list figures.

### **HSE Waiting Lists**

861. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients waiting for a first outpatient appointment with a specialist consultant by wait times (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12976/21]

862. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if the NTPF will broaden the length of waiting times reported to include periods (details supplied) taking into consideration that some patients wait many years to access a first appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12977/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 861 and 862 together.

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 HSE continues to optimise productivity through alternative work practices such as the use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative outpatient settings.

In addition the National Treatment Purchas Fund (NTPF) is currently reviewing strategies to maximise activity and benefit for patients, to include, increased use of private hospitals , funding weekend and evening work in public hospitals, funding “ see and treat” services where minor procedures are provided at the same time outpatient consultations, funding hybrid ser-

vices where public and private hospitals contribute to the treatment of patients, virtual clinics, and clinical validation.

€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. This will be used 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 National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

The data requested by the Deputy has been provided to my Department by the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) and is outlined in the attached document. This document provides a breakdown of the over 18-month outpatient waiting list, by the time-bands specified by the deputy, as of the end of January 2021.

The NTPF has advised my Department that they are currently reviewing the published waiting list reports in the context of the separation of adult and child waiting lists. As part of these considerations, they will have regard to the request for greater detail in the published reports for longer waiting time bands. Statistical Disclosure Control (SDC) will also be taken into account in these considerations in order to preserve patient confidentiality.

Total Patients Waiting for a First Outpatient Appointment over 18 Months by Wait Time Band as at 28/01/2021

-	18-21 Months	21-24 Months	24-27 Months	27-30 Months	30-33 Months	33-36 Months	36-40 Months	40 Months +	Grand Total
28/01/2021	39428	31014	19755	16305	15498	11931	10938	26114	170983

### Hospital Waiting Lists

863. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of children in respect of the long waiting times for MRIs in CHI who are currently waiting; the duration of their wait; the number of children who have been outsourced for a MRI during 2020-21; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12978/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I sincerely regret that children can experience a long waiting time for hospital appointments and procedures, and I am conscious of the burden that this places on them and their families. This Government is committed to improving waiting times for all patients accessing hospital treatment across all specialties.

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, and this has had a significant impact on both available capacity and operational activity levels. 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.

In relation to the specific query regarding the number of children and long waiting times for MRIs in CHI that are currently waiting; the duration of their wait; the number of children who have been outsourced for an MRI during 2020-2021, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Paediatric Services**

864. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of children who were outsourced for scoliosis surgery in each of the years 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the hospital to which they were outsourced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12979/21]

865. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if there are plans to outsource children for scoliosis surgery; his views on the wait times for scoliosis surgery; the number of children waiting; the plans to ensure children's safety and their right to access the best attainable healthcare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12980/21]

866. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of children currently on a suspended inpatient list for scoliosis surgery across all hospitals; the time suspended; the number of children waiting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12981/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 864 to 866, inclusive, together.

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 long waiting orthopaedic 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.

In relation to the specific queries raised regarding Scoliosis surgery, as this is a service issue, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Waiting Lists**

867. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will have a MRI; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12986/21]

**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.

### **HSE Staff**

868. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the longest waiting time experienced by a HSE CHO4 staff member to have a grievance hearing arranged for stage 1 of the HSE grievance procedure following submission of a formal grievance; the longest waiting time experienced by a HSE CHO4 staff member for the arrangement of a stage 2 hearing following the completion of stage 1 among cases from 2020-21; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13002/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter.

### **HSE Staff**

869. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the details of appointments to HSE adult mental health psychology posts that were not subject to a competition process from January 2014 until December 2020 in CHO4 (details supplied); the reason a competition process involving eligible candidates did not take place in each instance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13003/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the deputy as soon as possible.

### **Dental Services**

870. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the status of medical card reimbursement for dentists who treat medical card holders in areas (details supplied) in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13004/21]

871. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the steps he is taking to improve funding of dental health care through the medical card system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13005/21]

951. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health when dentists will carry out their work on patients with medical cards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13410/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 870, 871 and 951 together.

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. Patients may choose to have their treatment undertaken by any dentist who participates in the Scheme. The HSE will assist medical card holders in accessing such treatment if required.

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. In that respect, I have asked my officials and the HSE to bring forward proposals to address the immediate concerns of the dental community. 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.

### **Hospital Staff**

872. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health if the vacant position of paediatric rheumatologist in Children's Health Ireland, Crumlin, has been filled; if there are further similar positions still waiting to be filled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13010/21]

**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**

873. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the cost per person and overall cost of delivering mental health first aid training since its inception per year and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13019/21]

**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**

874. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the number of organisations that have received mental health first aid training; the number which were sports organisations; the number of persons per organisation in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13020/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Suicide Prevention**

875. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the number of GAA clubs that have received safeTALK training through health club initiatives; the number of persons per club, by age; the cost of delivering this training per year and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13021/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Suicide Prevention**

876. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the cost per person to complete ASIST suicide prevention training; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13022/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the deputy as soon as possible.

### **Suicide Prevention**

877. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the cost per person to complete

safeTALK training; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13023/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the deputy as soon as possible.

### **National Treatment Purchase Fund**

878. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health if surgery will be carried out for a person (details supplied) through the National Treatment Purchase Fund. [13024/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) works with public hospitals, as opposed to with patients directly, to offer and provide the funding for treatment to clinically suitable long waiting patients who are on an inpatient/day case waiting list for surgery, having been referred on to such a list following clinical assessment by a consultant/specialist at an outpatient clinic.

The key criteria of the NTPF is the prioritisation of the longest waiting patients first. While the NTPF identifies patients eligible for NTPF treatment, it is solely on the basis of their time spent on the Inpatient/Daycase Waiting List. The clinical suitability of the patient to avail of NTPF funded treatment is determined by the public hospital.

In respect of the patient's appointment at the Midlands Regional Hospital Tullamore, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Equipment**

879. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if there is a review into the effectiveness of UV equipment provided to St. James's Hospital, Dublin, and Ballinasloe, County Galway, on loan in the context of Covid-19; if he will provide the results to any such review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13025/21]

**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**

880. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health the status of a primary medical certificate application by persons (details supplied) in County Clare; when an assessment on this application will take place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13037/21]

**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 rel-

evant 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 predominantly 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**

881. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a primary medical certificate application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13042/21]

**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 predominantly 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

882. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the status of a primary medical certificate application by a person (details supplied). [13048/21]

**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.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

883. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health if there is data to track the extent to which persons who flew into Ireland during January 2021 were associated with the spread of Covid-19 and the import of new variants of Covid-19 from Brazil or South Africa. [13052/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSPC (Health Protection Surveillance Centre) monitors the epidemiological situation in Ireland – recording total numbers of cases, tracking outbreaks or clusters, and monitoring the most likely modes of transmission.

The total number of cases recorded by HSPC to date, where the most likely source of transmission was travel, was 2,137 as of midnight on 31st January 2021. Travel related cases include cases who acquire COVID-19 infection outside of Ireland (imported cases) and cases who acquire COVID-19 infection directly from imported cases. The estimated number of cases notified in January where the most likely source of transmission was travel related was 457 cases.

Regulations underpinning a mandatory testing and home quarantine regime have been introduced since 4th February in an effort to mitigate the risk of importing new variants of concern to Ireland. Passengers arriving into Ireland from overseas are required to complete a COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form, to present evidence of a negative pre-departure RT-PCR test taken within 72 hours of arrival and to observe mandatory quarantine.

Passengers arriving from the designated ‘high-risk’ Category 2 are subject to stricter home quarantine measures and are also advised to contact a GP to arrange a free PCR test. Positives identified through these tests are sent to the NVRL for genomic sequencing to detect the presence of new variants in Ireland. It is the Government’s intention to commence the operation of mandatory hotel quarantine as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

884. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health if an MRI scan will be arranged for a person (details supplied). [13072/21]

**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.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

885. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health if there is an obligation on home care providers to inform the families when the carers of patients are found to have contracted Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13074/21]

**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.

### **General Practitioner Services**

886. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of newly qualified general practitioners that took up work in County Cavan in each of the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13107/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Staff**

887. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of whole-time equivalent sonographers in St. Michael's Hospital, Dún Laoghaire in 2020 and to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13108/21]

**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.

### **Disability Services Data**

888. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of adults with intellectual disabilities in residential care in County Leitrim; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13109/21]

**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.

### **Dental Services**

889. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of dental hygien-

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ists in CHO 6 and 7 in each of the years of 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021; if this number will be further increased; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13110/21]

**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 Procedures**

890. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if bladder botox is carried out at University Hospital Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13111/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Staff**

891. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of consultant ENT surgeons working in Mallow General Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13112/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Staff**

892. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the overall staffing levels in the accident and emergency department of St. Vincent's University Hospital since 2018 in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13113/21]

**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.

### **Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services**

893. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the approved positions and vacancies within CAMHS services in County Offaly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13114/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Suicide Prevention**

894. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the whole-term equivalent staff in County Monaghan employed under the Connecting for Life strategy; the staff vacancies that exist; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13115/21]

**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.

### **Hospital Staff**

895. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if a recruitment campaign for additional full-time permanent nurses will commence shortly at Bantry General Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13116/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Staff**

896. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if all recruitment campaigns for vacant consultant posts within Dublin Midlands Hospital Group are advertised outside of Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13117/21]

**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.

### **Hospital Waiting Lists**

897. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the average waiting time to see a consultant oncologist at Mercy University Hospital; the number of persons on the waiting list for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13118/21]

**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**

898. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the average waiting time to see a paediatric ophthalmology consultant at University Hospital Waterford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13119/21]

**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 are 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 HSE continues to optimise productivity

through alternative work practices such as the use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative outpatient settings.

An additional €240 million has been provided in Budget 2021 for an Access to Care Fund, €210m of which has been allocated to the HSE and €30m to the NTPF for the provision of treatment as required in both private and public hospitals in order to address capacity issues in acute hospitals arising as a result of measures taken in the context of Covid-19, as well as to address waiting lists.

My Department, the HSE and the NTPF are continuously reviewing waiting lists with a view to ensuring that services for scheduled care are resumed as soon as it is deemed safe to do so in line with HSE clinical guidelines.

The data requested by the Deputy has been provided to my Department by the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) who have advised that as of the end of January 2021, the average waiting time for an Outpatient Paediatric Ophthalmology consultation in University Hospital Waterford is 141 days.

### **Hospital Waiting Lists**

899. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the average waiting time to see a consultant spinal neurosurgeon at the Mater Hospital Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13120/21]

**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 HSE continues to optimise productivity through alternative work practices such as the use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative outpatient settings.

In addition the National Treatment Purchas Fund (NTPF) is currently reviewing strategies to maximise activity and benefit for patients, to include increased use of private hospitals, funding weekend and evening work in public hospitals, funding “ see and treat” services where minor procedures are provided at the same time outpatient consultations, funding hybrid services where public and private hospitals contribute to the treatment of patients, virtual clinics, and clinical validation.

Budget 2021 provided an additional €240 million for an Access to Care Fund, €210 of which has been allocated to the HSE and €30 million to the National treatment Purchase Fund

for the provision of treatment in both private and public hospitals in order to address capacity issues in acute hospitals arising as a result of measures taken in the context of Covid-19, as well as to address waiting lists.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

The National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) have advised my Department that they cannot provide the information at the level of detail requested by the Deputy. They can only provide information at speciality level and in this regard, Neurology is the closest to the Deputy's request. As of the end of January 2021 the average waiting time for a neurology consultation in The Mater Hospital was 534 days.

### **Hospital Waiting Lists**

900. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the average waiting time to see a consultant rheumatologist at Sligo University Hospital; the number of persons on the waiting list for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13121/21]

**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 HSE continues to optimise productivity through alternative work practices such as the use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative outpatient settings.

In addition the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) is currently reviewing strategies to maximise activity and benefit for patients, to include increased use of private hospitals, funding weekend and evening work in public hospitals, funding "see and treat" services where minor procedures are provided at the same time outpatient consultations, funding hybrid services where public and private hospitals contribute to the treatment of patients, virtual clinics, and clinical validation.

€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. This will be used 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.

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The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

The information requested the Deputy concerning the number of persons on the Sligo University Hospital rheumatology outpatient waiting list and average waiting time, is outlined in the attached document.

OP Rheumatology Waiters as of 28/1/2021

-	0-3 Months	3-6 Months	6-9 Months	9-12 Months	12-15 Months	15-18 Months	18 Months +	Grand Total
Sligo University Hospital	296	280	128	204	162	93	200	1363
Rheumatology	296	280	128	204	162	93	200	1363
Grand Total	296	280	128	204	162	93	200	1363
Average Num days:	299							

### Disability Services Data

901. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the number of clinicians in CHO 7 that have been redeployed from early intervention and school age disability teams into assessment of needs posts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13129/21]

**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.

### Vaccination Programme

902. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health if technical issues in relation to the Covid-19 vaccine registration portal for health professionals have been raised with his Department; if so, the steps he has taken to correct such issues; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13130/21]

**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

903. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider providing updates to health professionals through the Covid-19 vaccine registration portal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13131/21]

**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

904. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the status of the roll-out of vac-

cines to front-line healthcare workers; when this is expected to be completed; and if healthcare assistants are included in this phase. [13145/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Frontline healthcare workers (HCWs) in direct patient contact roles will be vaccinated in Group 2 of the vaccine allocation groups. This includes HCWs working in public, private, and voluntary settings. Other HCWs, not in direct patient contact, will be vaccinated in Group 6.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### UN Conventions

905. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health if he considers the trace amount of THC in products derived from the EU hemp crop to be controlled within the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13152/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As some of the matters referred to by the Deputy are the subject of legal proceedings I am not in a position to comment on the matter.

### UN Conventions

906. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health if EU hemp food products which contain trace amounts of THC are controlled within the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13153/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 , Article 2, the Definition of “food” states that “*food shall not includenarcotic or psychotropic substances within the meaning of the United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961, and the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971*”.

### UN Conventions

907. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health if EU authorities regulate EU hemp food products which contain trace amounts of tetrahydrocannabinol, THC, as products controlled within the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13154/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 , Article 2, the Definition of “food” states that “*food shall not include narcotic or psychotropic substances within the meaning of the United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961, and the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971*”.

### EU Regulations

908. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health if the European Commission regulates EU hemp products with trace amounts of THC such as food; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13155/21]

10 March 2021

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 , Article 2, the Definition of “food” states that “*food shall not include narcotic or psychotropic substances within the meaning of the United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961, and the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971*”.

### EU Regulations

909. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health if all three sources of cannabidiol are regulated as food by the European Commission; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13156/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The use of certain extraction methods involving solvents, like supercritical CO<sub>2</sub> or ethanol, in the production of hemp-derived foods or ingredients may bring them within the scope of the novel food Regulation.

A novel food is a food or food ingredient that was not available on the EU market to a significant degree before 15 May 1997.

A novel food must be authorised before it can be placed on the EU market.

I would be grateful if the Deputy would specify the three sources of cannabidiol referred to in his question, on receipt of which I can possibly provide further information.

### EU Regulations

910. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health if the European Commission is in the process of providing scientifically authorised levels of THC in hemp foods in line with Article 28 of Council Decision (EU) 2021/3 of 23 November 2020 and with reference to Article 2 of Regulation (EC) No. 178/2002; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13157/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 , Article 2, the Definition of “food” states that “*food shall not include narcotic or psychotropic substances within the meaning of the United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961, and the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971*”.

### UN Conventions

911. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the recent clarifications provided by the European Commission to an organisation (details supplied); if Ireland will continue to apply criminal drugs laws to foods which are not controlled within the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13159/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 , Article 2, the Definition of “food” states that “*food shall not include narcotic or psychotropic substances within the meaning of the United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961, and the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971*”.

### UN Conventions

912. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health if Ireland is the only EU member state with an existing hemp food industry which continues to use criminal drugs laws to control trace amounts of THC which is not controlled within the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13160/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 , Article 2, the Definition of “food” states that *“food shall not include narcotic or psychotropic substances within the meaning of the United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961, and the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971”*.

### UN Conventions

913. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health his views on whether the interests of justice are served by applying Irish criminal drugs laws to food products which are not controlled within the UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs when the express purpose of those Irish laws is to give effect to the convention; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13161/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 , Article 2, the Definition of “food” states that *“food shall not include narcotic or psychotropic substances within the meaning of the United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961, and the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971”*.

### EU Regulations

914. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health his plans to exercise the Misuse of Drugs Acts against CBD foods with trace amounts of THC produced and or sold by Irish companies who have novel food applications pending at considerable cost on the advice of the Food Safety Authority given that the European Commission has indicated to an organisation (details supplied) that the Commission itself has regulatory authority over the certification pathway under Regulation (EU) 2015/2283 of the European Parliament and that the Commission has now resumed the verification process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13162/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 , Article 2, the Definition of “food” states that *“food shall not include narcotic or psychotropic substances within the meaning of the United Nations Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs, 1961, and the United Nations Convention on Psychotropic Substances, 1971”*.

### Vaccination Programme

915. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Health his views on the potential introduction of vaccine passports (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13164/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is not yet understood whether the available vaccines prevent vaccinated persons from being infected or transmitting the disease to others. As such, the impact vaccinations will have on travel policies internationally is yet to be determined.

Discussions are ongoing, including at EU level, regarding vaccine certificates, their poten-

tial impact on travel policy and the importance of non-discrimination. The WHO continues to caution governments against introducing immunity passports at this time.

Under the current regime vaccinated persons are required to observe the mandatory testing and quarantine regimes that is in place when travelling to Ireland from overseas.

The Government gives continuing consideration to travel policy informed by the epidemiological situation internationally and public health advice.

### **Cannabis for Medicinal Use**

916. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health when Sativex will be approved for use; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13167/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drug schemes, in accordance with the provisions of the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

In line with the 2013 Health Act and the national framework agreed with industry, a company must submit an application to the HSE to have a new medicine added to the reimbursement list.

Reimbursement is for licenced indications which have been granted market authorisation by the European Medicines Agency or the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

In making a relevant reimbursement decision, the HSE is required under the Act to have regard to a number of criteria including efficacy, the health needs of the public, cost effectiveness and potential or actual budget impact.

HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the taxpayer are made on objective, scientific and economic grounds, on the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics (NCPE). The NCPE conducts health technology assessments (HTAs) for the HSE and makes recommendations on reimbursement to assist HSE decisions.

The HSE has advised that, in 2014, it notified the manufacturer of Delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol/Cannabidiol, THC/CBD (Sativex) that there was significant uncertainty around the cost-effectiveness of the medicine and, as a consequence it did not support reimbursement of Sativex, at that time.

In February 2018, the HSE received a revised application from the manufacturer for pricing / reimbursement of Sativex indicated as treatment for symptom improvement in adult patients with moderate to severe spasticity due to multiple sclerosis who have not responded adequately to other anti-spasticity medication and who demonstrate clinically significant improvement in spasticity-related symptoms during an initial trial of therapy.

In April 2018, the HSE commissioned a full HTA with respect to this indication. On 12 August 2019, the NCPE received the applicant's submission. The Health technology assessment is currently ongoing at the NCPE. The output of this HTA will be an important input into the decision-making processes of the HSE.

The application for Sativex remains under consideration with the HSE and is being assessed in line with the 2013 Health Act.

## Hospital Services

917. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health his plans to reinstate repair clinics for upper prosthetic limbs at Merlin Park Hospital, Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13169/21]

**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

918. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health when a general practitioner (details supplied) in County Clare will be in possession of Covid-19 vaccinations to inoculate patients in view that some patients are over 80 years and have underlying issues; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13174/21]

**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

919. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health when the HSE will be in a position to resume issuing primary medical certificates in the context of the disabled drivers tax concession scheme which was halted in 2020 as a result to a Supreme Court ruling, if he will provide an update any progress in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13175/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** 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.

### **Hospital Facilities**

920. **Deputy Dessie Ellis** asked the Minister for Health the actions he plans to take to end the practice of imposing parking fees at all public hospitals given that they have proved a costly burden on those attending the hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13179/21]

**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.

### **Ambulance Service**

921. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter regarding the payment of ambulance service personnel (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13181/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Public service employers are required to ensure that public monies are appropriately spent and accounted for. In that light, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy to advise their approach in recouping the monies that the Deputy is referring to.

### **Speech and Language Therapy**

922. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health the reason a speech and language therapist is being removed from a school (details supplied) on the basis of HSE rationalisation and speech and language therapists are now to be accessed locally; the reason the school-based therapist cannot remain in situ alongside their community counterparts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13182/21]

**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 to the deputy directly.

### **Medical Cards**

923. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health the reason PCRS will not accept specific documents to progress a medical card application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13184/21]

**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**

924. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health the remuneration for pharmacists working in mass vaccination centres; if the method of their recruitment has an impact on their remuneration; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13190/21]

**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**

925. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons that arrived into Ireland in each week from 1 January 2021 to date and declared on the passenger locator form that they had been in a category 2 designated state in the previous 14 days; the number from each category 2 designated state in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13205/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** All passengers arriving to the State are required to complete a COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form (PLF) in accordance with SI 45/2021. There are limited exemptions from this requirement, as set out in the regulations, such as for international transport workers, diplomats, etc. The Passenger Locator Form is used to support a system of engagements with arriving passengers including the targeting of public health messaging by SMS and may be used for contact tracing.

It should be noted that PLF data does not constitute formal arrival data into the country, due to the different intended purpose for the system and also the number of exempted persons as set out above. In addition, some passengers may complete a PLF in advance but be unable to travel as intended, and the data below may include some duplicates for certain travellers. Passengers may be completing a PLF and not staying overnight in the state or transiting onto Northern Ireland.

The designation of Category 2 states is provided for in SI 44/2021, with those Regulations coming into effect on 6th February 2021. Since then, a number of additional Category 2 states have been designated and the total number now comprises 33 states.

Numbers provided are for countries where a minimum number of 10 arrived from a Category 2 country, as providing any smaller numbers could risk identifying individual passengers. Where a passenger has declared that they have travelled in a number of Category 2 countries prior to arriving into Ireland, the most recent country is reported. Passengers will only appear once on this report.

The data below is an indicative number of passengers whose journey originated in a Category 2 state as well as those passengers that listed a Category 2 state in their recent travel history from 8th February to 7th March. This data was not captured for January.

48,199 Passenger Locator Forms were completed 8th Feb – 7th March from all countries of departure for relevant travellers.

8.6% of the Passenger Locator Forms indicated a category 2 country during this period.

Number of accompanying children U16 are declared on the PLF, further information is not recorded on these passengers.

The figures below are subject change due to ongoing data cleansing e.g. duplication where passengers completed the ePLF twice.

Country	8th-14th Feb	15th -21st Feb	22nd-28th Feb	1st-7th March	Total
UAE	914	302	373	239	1828
Brazil	318	391	408	348	1465
South Africa	84	62	89	78	313
Austria	47	36	37	29	149
Argentina	16	15	27	38	96
Other Countries*	66	77	100	78	321
Total					4172

**Other Countries\***

Angola, Botswana, Bolivia, Burundi, Cape Verde, Colombia, Chile, DR Congo, Ecuador, Eswatini, French Guiana, Guyana, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Rwanda, Suriname, Seychelles, Tanzania, Uruguay, Venezuela, Zambia, Zimbabwe.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

926. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the level of compliance in filling out the passenger locator forms on a weekly basis in each of the past five weeks; the number of forms which were correctly and incorrectly completed on a weekly basis, respectively; and the number of persons that refused to fill out the form on a weekly basis in tabular form. [13206/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** All passengers arriving to the State are required to complete a COVID-19 Passenger Locator form, there are limited exemptions from this requirement for international transport workers, diplomats and children under 16. The Passenger Locator Form is used to support a system of engagements with arriving passengers including the targeting of public health messaging by SMS and email and may be used for contact tracing. Passengers may have completed a passenger locator form in advance of travelling and not travelled. Invalid paper forms may have illegible information including phone numbers or other essential information that is unclear and is required for follow-up. The paper form has been updated to an OCR form to improve legibility. Efforts continue to promote the use of the online form.

For the month of February a total of 51,629 Passenger Locator Forms were completed of which 93.6% were valid and 6.4% were invalid.

There have been no incidences of non-compliance notified to the Garda National Immigration Board during the month of February.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

927. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the percentage of incoming passengers who declared an essential reason for travel in each week from 1 February 2021 to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13207/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** All passengers arriving to the State are required to complete a COVID-19 Passenger Locator form, there are limited exemptions from this requirement for international transport workers, diplomats and children under 16. The Passenger Locator Form is used to support a system of engagements with arriving passengers including the targeting of public health messaging by SMS and email and may be used for contact tracing. Passengers may have completed a passenger locator form in advance of travelling and

not travelled.

Since 6th February the reference to Council Recommendation (EU) 2020/1475 on a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was removed from the PLF and the declaration on essential travel no longer recorded.

From the 1st to 7th of February inclusive a total of 12,659 Passenger Locator Forms were completed of which 46.3% claimed the essential travel exemption.

### Hospital Facilities

928. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the details of the specific arrangements in place at public hospitals to ensure that cancer patients are facilitated with easy access to car parking at reduced rates as directed to the HSE by his Department in 2018, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13211/21]

929. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the details of the specific arrangements in place at public hospitals to ensure flexible charging systems for families and friends of patients that are frequent visitors as directed to the HSE by his Department since 2018, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13212/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 928 and 929 together.

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.

In relation to the specific queries raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Freedom of Information

930. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that bereaved families that lost loved ones in a nursing home (details supplied) in County Louth are being asked for hundreds of euro by the HSE for access to records under freedom of information; if he will intervene in the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13216/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health Service Executive (HSE) is an independent body, in its own right for the purposes of Freedom of Information.

Statutory responsibility for the HSE's compliance with the provisions and requirements of the Freedom of Information Act 2014 lies with the HSE itself and not with the Minister for Health.

As this is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## Mental Health Policy

931. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the priority being afforded to mental health services; the extra funding made available to his Department for mental health services in 2021 compared to 2020; the extra resources that will be needed over the next five years to implement the sharing the vision mental health policy fully; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13302/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Mental Health is a priority for me and for the Government. Supporting positive mental health is particularly important during the current pandemic.

The Government remains fully committed to the continued development of mental health services, from mental health promotion to acute and specialist services. The approach taken reflects the principles of *Sláintecare*.

I am progressing the various mental health commitments set out in our national mental health policy, *Sharing the Vision*, and those in the current Programme for Government. In addition, I have recently extended *Connecting for Life*, the national suicide reduction strategy, until 2024.

The Government has invested significantly in enhancing mental health services. The Budget 2021 allocation of €1.076 billion for mental health is an increase of €50 million over 2020. Of the additional €50 million for 2021, €23 million will be used to commence implementation of many of the short-term recommendations in *Sharing the Vision*. This will fund an additional 153 staff in enhancing community mental health teams, including CAMHS, clinical care programmes, bereavement counselling, employment supports and crisis resolution.

The existing base budget each year plus any additional allocation will allow us to develop a more modern mental health service, which is recovery-focused and community based. One of the priority actions for 2021, as set out in the HSE National Service Plan, is to develop a sustainable costed plan for the governance, model of services and implementation of the national policy for mental health, *Sharing the Vision*, which has a ten-year implementation plan, overseen by the National Implementation and Monitoring Committee (NIMC). The funding required will be based on the NIMC's work plan, which will identify developments for each year. This funding will then be sought as part of the estimates process and in conjunction with the development of the HSE's National Service Plan each year.

*Sharing the Vision* is not prescriptive on staff numbers, however the composition and skill mix of each community mental health team (CMHT), along with clinical and operational protocols, should take into consideration the needs and social circumstances of its sector population and the availability of staff with relevant skills. Providing the core skills of CMHTs are met, there should be flexibility in how the teams are resourced to meet the full range of needs where there is strong population-based needs assessment data.

## Medical Inquiries

932. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health if issues raised in a High Court action by a person (details supplied) regarding failures in the north-east regional colposcopy service at Louth County Hospital have been reviewed, investigated and rectified; the way in which and when this was carried out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13303/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Staff**

933. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Health the status of nursing and consultant posts approved by the HSE in 2018 for the operation of the Women's Health in Epilepsy programme and the implementation of the mandatory pregnancy prevention programme for women who are prescribed sodium valproate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13311/21]

**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**

934. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Health if the number of women of childbearing potential in Ireland currently taking the drug sodium valproate is known; if there has been a reduction in the number since the restrictions placed on the licensing of the drug in 2018; the number of patients that are engaged with the prevent pregnancy prevention programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13312/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this information is not held by the Department, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Ambulance Service**

935. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the steps being taken to improve the ambulance service in Connemara, particularly in the more remote areas of west and north Connemara; the effect of the improvements to date on the waiting times for ambulances, particularly in acute cases; if it is planned to locate a new base in a central location in Connemara (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13315/21]

**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.

### **Dental Services**

936. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if a dental appointment will be expedited for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13317/21]

**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**

937. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Health if medical assessments are due to recommence for primary medical certificate applicants; if so, the date of commencement; the current situation in relation to the issuing of primary medical certificates to those who qualify; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13318/21]

**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.

### **General Practitioner Services**

938. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to problems experienced by persons in County Louth, particularly in Dundalk, in getting onto general practitioner lists both as public and private patients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13327/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Where a medical card or GP visit card holder experiences difficulty in finding a GP to accept him/her as a patient, the HSE has the power to assign that person to a GP's GMS patient list where the person has unsuccessfully applied to at least three GPs in the area who hold GMS contracts (or fewer GPs if there are fewer GPs in the area).

People who do not hold a medical card or GP visit card access GP services on a private basis and can make enquiries directly to any GP practice they wish to register with. As private contractors, it is a matter for each individual GP to decide whether to accept additional private patients. Where a GP practice has a full list of patients and cannot take on new patients, patients should contact other GP practices in the surrounding areas.

The Government is aware of the workforce issues currently facing general practice, including the limited access to GP services in certain areas, and has implemented a number of measures to improve recruitment and retention in general practice.

These measures include an increase in investment in general practice by approximately 40% (€210 million) between 2019 and 2023 under the terms of the 2019 GMS GP Agreement GP. The Agreement provides for increased support for GPs working in rural practices and for those in disadvantaged urban areas, and for improvements to maternity and paternity leave arrangements. In addition, the number of GPs entering training has been increased steadily over the past ten years, rising from 120 in 2009 to 214 in 2020, with a further increase foreseen in 2021. The ICGP noted a record number of applications for the 2021 GP training programme.

These measures will see an increase in the number of GPs working in the State, improving access to GP services for patients throughout the country.

### **Vaccination Programme**

939. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the priority group in which carers for children with cancer will be included for the vaccination against Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13343/21]

**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-donnely-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

940. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when carers for children with cancer can expect to be vaccinated against Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13344/21]

**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.

Vaccination of those aged 70 and older (in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74) 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.

In relation to the categories of very high risk and high risk conditions, this list is not exhaustive. It may also include people who have been classed as at very high risk, based on clinical judgement and an assessment of need. It is recommended that people discuss this with their treating physician who is in the best position to give appropriate advice.

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/>

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**

941. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if persons aged 16 to 64 years of age with haematological cancers will be reprioritised within the Covid-19 vaccination strategy and moved to cohort 4 alongside others whose illness puts them at high risk of severe disease if they contract the virus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13345/21]

**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.

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The NIAC continues to monitor data around this disease and indeed emerging data on effectiveness of vaccines on a rolling basis.

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<https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/>

In relation to the categories of very high risk and high risk conditions, this list is not exhaustive. It may also include people who have been classed as at very high risk, based on clinical judgement and an assessment of need. It is recommended that the individuals concerned discuss this with their treating physician who is in the best position to give appropriate advice.

### **Oireachtas Joint Committee Recommendations**

942. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if the recommendations regarding sodium valproate made by the Oireachtas Committee on Health of the 32nd Dáil (details supplied) have been fully implemented; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13350/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Valproate-containing medicines (also known as sodium valproate or valproic acid) are approved in Ireland under the brand name Epilim, for the treatment of epilepsy and bipolar disorder. Based on the totality of available scientific data on this drug, it is known that children exposed in utero are at a high risk of serious developmental disorders (in up to 30-40% of cases) and congenital malformations (in approximately 10% of cases).

To prevent exposure during pregnancy, there is a robust regulatory framework for the licensed use of Epilim in women of childbearing potential. This regulatory framework was strengthened following participation by the Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA) in two EU-wide reviews in 2014 and 2017.

After the European Medicines Agency (EMA) issued new recommendations on the use of sodium valproate in early 2018, the HPRA collaborated with national stakeholders, including patient representatives and healthcare professionals, to implement the new valproate risk-minimisation measures in Ireland. These measures included changes to the product information for patients and healthcare professionals; a visual warning on the packaging of valproate medicines; updated educational materials to reflect the new measures and provide age-appropriate

advice; and a patient alert card to be attached to the packaging so that pharmacists can go through it with the patient when valproate is dispensed.

To support the actions taken by the HPRA, the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland directed pharmacists that they must inform women of child-bearing age of the potential risk of abnormal pregnancy outcomes when supplying any medicine containing valproate. This includes providing counselling and including a Package Leaflet and Alert Card with each supply of these medicines.

To address the more operational aspects of this issue, a HSE Valproate Response Project was established in May 2018 under the remit of the HSE Office of the Chief Clinical Officer. The Project Team was able to provide expert support to individuals and families with concerns about previous exposure to valproate and the possible impact on their children. The HSE team has also worked to improve the structures in place to support families affected by foetal valproate syndrome. A specialist dedicated genetics clinic has been established in Our Lady's Hospital, Crumlin, to support diagnosis, and the HSE is working to improve access to genetic testing.

The HSE's medium- to long-term response to the valproate issue is focused on the establishment of a Programme for Women's Health in Epilepsy within one of the Regional Epilepsy Centres, which will coordinate this national response. This means that all women taking valproate will have yearly follow-up, sign a valproate agreement form, be kept up-to-date with developments and signposted to other services, including the diagnostic service for those potentially exposed during pregnancy.

### **Medicinal Products**

943. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if a register is currently operational to record persons that are prescribed the drug sodium valproate during pregnancy; if a register is currently operational to record persons affected by foetal anticonvulsant syndrome; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13351/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Suicide Incidence**

944. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who died by suicide in each of the years 2017 to 2020, by CHO area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13354/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the deputy as soon as possible.

### **Health Services**

945. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the CHO areas in which attendees at day services are being charged for transport costs; the number of persons being charged; the estimated costs charged and revenue raised each month; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13356/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** The Government is committed to providing services and supports for people with disabilities which will empower them to live independent lives, provide greater independence in accessing the services they choose, and enhance their ability to tailor the supports required to meet their needs and plan their lives.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Eating Disorders**

946. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if CAMHS and the mental health services of the HSE in County Clare have psychologists, counsellors and dieticians specifically trained to support adolescents and teenagers that are battling with eating disorders; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13357/21]

**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.

### **General Practitioner Services**

947. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Health when he plans to extend free general practitioner care to six and seven year olds as envisaged under the Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Bill 2020; if children who are now turning six years of age and are becoming ineligible for the scheme will become eligible once the scheme is extended; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13386/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Government is committed to increasing access to GP care without charges for children, an important healthcare measure that will remove a potentially prohibitive cost barrier to accessing GP care and will help to improve children's health as they develop. At present all children under six years of age are eligible for a GP visit card and therefore GP care without charges. The Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Act 2020 provides, amongst other things, for the phased expansion of GP care without fees to all children aged 12 years and under. The initial stage of this phased expansion will be the provision of GP care without fees to all children aged between 6 and 8. The appropriate date for commencing the expansion remains under consideration in light of COVID-19 and the additional pressures the expansion might place on general practice in that context. This date will be determined following consultation with the IMO. It is important to ensure that any additional pressures placed on general practice will not limit its capacity to meet the needs of all patients in the community.

### **Disability Support Services**

948. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health if all necessary remedial works have been completed at the group home for persons with physical and sensory disabilities at Drummond Otra, Carrickmacross, County Monaghan; the date this home will be operational; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13388/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** The Govern-

ment 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.

### **Home Help Service**

949. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if additional home help hours will be provided for persons (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13392/21]

**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.

### **Respite Care Services**

950. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the number of respite beds in each of the community hospitals in County Kerry available for convalescence and the elderly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13394/21]

**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. 951 answered with Question No. 870.*

### **National Maternity Hospital**

952. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Health the future planned ownership, governance and control of the new national maternity hospital; the roles religious orders will play; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13411/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Firstly, I should explain that the corporate and clinical governance arrangements for the new National Maternity Hospital (NMH) are set out in the *Mulvey Agreement*, which was finalised following an extensive mediation process between the NMH and the St Vincent's Healthcare Group (SVHG). The *Mulvey Agreement* provides for the establishment of a new company - *National Maternity Hospital at Elm Park DAC* - which will have clinical and operational, as well as financial and budgetary independence in the provision of maternity, gynaecology and neonatal services.

My Department and the HSE have had very significant engagement with NMH and SVHG to agree a legal framework, the overall objective of which is to ensure that the new hospital will remain in State ownership, and that health services at the hospital will be provided without religious, ethnic or other distinction or ethos. While the development of the legal framework has proved to be more protracted than originally anticipated, I am hopeful that discussions will be concluded, and the drafting of the legal documents finalised, in the coming weeks. Once

finalised, I will bring the legal framework to Government for approval.

The Deputy can be assured that the Religious Sisters of Charity will not play any role in the governance or operation of the new NMH. In that regard, in May 2017, the Sisters announced their decision to end their involvement and relinquish their shareholding in SVHG. Since then, the Sisters have resigned from the SVHG Board and have secured the approval of the Vatican to the proposed transfer of their shareholding to a new company, *St Vincent's Holdings CLG*. It is understood that SVHG has completed all regulatory and legal documentation to facilitate the share transfer. However, under the terms of their Service Level Agreement, SVHG requires the consent of the HSE to the share transfer. I understand that the HSE and SVHG are currently engaging in relation to this matter.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

953. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health if there are plans to include indoor and outdoor play centres in level 3 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13414/21]

**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 23rd February, 2021, the Government published its updated plan for managing Covid-19 - *COVID-19 Resilience & Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead*. This three part plan reviews the learnings from our experience to date, considers the enormous impacts our efforts to manage and suppress the disease have had on our economy and on our society and sets out a cautious and measured approach to the easing of restrictions over the coming months.

The public health measures in place at any level of the Plan 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.

Under the current public health measures at level 5 no indoor or outdoor exercise group activities, including those involving children, should take place. Further information is available here - <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/#exercise-and-sporting-events>

Information on numbers for indoor and outdoor gatherings for every level of the Plan is available at the following link - <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-living-with-covid-19/>

*Question No. 954 answered with Question No. 769.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

955. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if he will report on the

parameters that are required to trigger the movement from level 5 to 4 of the Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13431/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As has been the case throughout this pandemic, the National Public Health Emergency Team (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/>

### **Vaccination Programme**

956. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health the number of residents in each county that have received their first and second vaccination against Covid-19, respectively in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13434/21]

**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**

957. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health the number of general practitioner practices per county that have yet to receive the necessary allocation of vaccines to cover the first vaccination of their patients over 85 years of age as of 4 March 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13435/21]

**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**

958. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the circumstances of a family (details supplied); if consideration will be given to this request; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13438/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation

10 March 2021

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.

Vaccination of those aged 70 and older (in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74) 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/>

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**

959. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide fur-

ther information on a case (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13439/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Departmental Reviews**

960. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if he will conduct a review into the current assessment of needs standard operating procedure; the role parents will take in this review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13440/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Vaccination Programme**

961. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if he will review the policy of allocating only certain types of vaccines (details supplied) for the over 70s in view of the recent decisions in this respect by the French and German Governments. [13443/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Covid-19 vaccines can only be approved and used if they comply with all the requirements of quality, safety and efficacy set out in the EU pharmaceutical legislation. Any authorised vaccine will be subject to ongoing monitoring in Ireland by the Health Product Regulatory Authority (HPRA).

Following the recommendation for use of vaccines against COVID-19 by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and authorisation for use by the European Commission, the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) develops guidance for their use in Ireland which is contained in the Immunisation Guidelines for Ireland. These guidelines are continuously updated and includes guidance on all new vaccines as they are approved for use in Ireland.

The National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) has recommended that, in line with the approvals granted by the European Medicines Agency (EMA), all currently authorised COVID-19 vaccines can be used in adults of all ages, including those aged 70 years and older.

NIAC has also recommended that mRNA vaccines (Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna) should be used for the over 70’s, where practicable and timely.

Preferential selection of an mRNA vaccine should not result in a vaccine delay of more than 3 weeks, as any benefit of using a higher efficacy vaccine may be lost.

The expert advice recognised that currently there is limited data on the AstraZeneca vaccine in relation to older age groups. Those aged over 70 are a key priority group for protection because of their greater risk of severe illness, hospitalisation and death from COVID-19. A number of other EU countries have made similar decisions with regard to the provision of mRNA vaccines to older people.

The NIAC continues to monitor data around this disease and indeed emerging data on effectiveness of vaccines on a rolling basis.

### **Medicinal Products**

962. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health the status of the inquiry into the historical licensing of sodium valproate which was announced in November 2020; if the terms of reference have been agreed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13444/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Details of the proposed inquiry into the historical licensing and use of sodium valproate in Ireland are being considered by officials within the Department of Health.

### **Medicinal Products**

963. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health if he plans to establish a valproate stakeholder group consisting of State bodies, representative and patient groups to improve the co-ordination of risk minimisation measures associated with the ongoing use of sodium valproate in women of child-bearing age; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13445/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The establishment of a valproate stakeholder group as described by the Deputy is being considered by officials as part of the Department's overall response to issues relating to sodium valproate.

### **Departmental Programmes**

964. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health the status of the establishment of the community operations programme for families of children affected by sodium valproate; if funding is currently in place to ensure that the programme is made fully operational; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13446/21]

**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.

### **Maternity Services**

965. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health if he will ensure that pregnant women can be joined by their partner during prenatal scans and childbirth; the current situation that applies in each maternity hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13448/21]

**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.

### **Assisted Human Reproduction**

966. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health the details of funding options available to persons requiring fertility treatment; if such treatment is not available on the public system under the medical card; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13459/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy will be aware, a com-

mitment 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.

### **Ambulance Service**

967. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 298 and 900 of 24 February 2021 and the reply issued by the HSE on 2 March 2021, the refurbishment work undertaken at the Carlow ambulance service base by the HSE; the breakdown of the costs; and if information (details supplied) in relation to the project will be provided. [13460/21]

**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 the Deputy directly in relation to this matter.

### **General Medical Services Scheme**

968. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health the reason the semaglutide (details supplied) injection was removed from the drug payment scheme for persons with polycystic ovary syndrome; if it will be included on the scheme for such persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13463/21]

**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

969. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he has given consideration to matters raised in correspondence (details supplied) regarding Covid-19 and the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018; his response to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13474/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It would not be appropriate for me, as Minister for Health, to discuss the details of any individual case.

As the Deputy will be aware, section 11 of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 sets out the law on access to termination of pregnancy in cases where there is a condition present affecting the foetus that is likely to lead to the death of the foetus before or within 28 days of birth. It requires the involvement of two medical practitioners, one of whom must be an obstetrician and the other a medical practitioner of a relevant specialty. Both must examine the pregnant woman and both must certify their reasonable opinion, formed in good faith that the termination of pregnancy can be carried out. The termination of pregnancy must then be carried out by the certifying obstetrician, or in cases where the second certifying doctor is also an obstetrician, either one may carry out the procedure.

The provisions in the 2018 Act reflect the recommendations made by the Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution, published in December 2017.

The operation of the legislation is a matter for attending clinicians. The appropriate medical body, the Institute of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists and Obstetricians based in the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, has published Clinical Guidance on Termination of Pregnancy in a number of scenarios, including the *Pathway for Management of Fatal Fetal Abnormalities and/or Life-Limiting Conditions Diagnosed During Pregnancy*.

I should note that the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 makes provision for review in cases where a medical practitioner has given an opinion that would not lead to certification for termination of pregnancy to be carried out. Section 13 of the Act provides that the pregnant woman, or a person acting on her behalf, may make an application to the HSE for a review of the relevant decision. Within three days of receiving such an application, the HSE must convene a committee of medical practitioners to review the relevant decision. The committee must complete its review not later than seven days from the date on which it was established.

Services for termination of pregnancy under the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 have continued to function during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Health Services

970. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the status of a paper (details supplied); and if his Department has acted on the proposal. [13476/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Following the presentation of the paper referenced by the Deputy in February 2020, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic led to a rapid reprioritisation of the Department's activities to manage the health and social care system's re-

sponse to the crisis. As a result of this, the paper remains under deliberation by the Department of Health.

### **Speech and Language Therapy**

971. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the protocol in place to ensure that students who receive in-school speech and language therapy (details supplied) but do not meet the needs of the children's disability networks teams do not lose access to these services when their provision is moved to the children's disability network teams; if the removal of in-school supports proposed is for all special schools or relates in particular to deaf education settings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13478/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible

### **Medical Internships**

972. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he plans to cut the 300 additional medical intern posts which were created in April 2020 as a result of the pandemic; the consideration that has been given to the impact of such a cut on the health service and on medical graduates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13479/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In April 2020, due to the evolving COVID-19 situation the Department of Health supported the HSE request to commence the 2020 Medical Intern intake earlier than usual and to offer an Intern place to all eligible applicants for the 2020 Medical Intern year.

This increase was an emergency measure in direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not planned, and it was never intended, that this increase would be sustained on an annual basis.

Following the application process 992 interns commenced employment with the HSE on 25th of May 2020 which was 80% of the total interns eligible for places in 2020, 20% of candidates offered an intern post did not take up the offer.

The number of medical internship posts available for July 2021 has reverted, as planned to 734, which is the agreed annual intake in line with current workforce planning projections. The number of intern places is in line with the numbers of training posts available in specialist training programmes, the next step in the training pathway following completion of an internship.

As the HSE are coming out of the third wave of COVID-19 and facing increased waiting lists and other challenges the focus is on ensuring they have senior doctors to deal with the impact of COVID. As part of the planned investment by the HSE in additional staffing, services and infrastructure the HSE will be investing in additional medical staffing in 2021. The HSE has:

- Increased the number of approved postgraduate training places by 106 places for July 2021;
- Introduced up to 40 new COVID Era Senior Fellowship posts for July 2021;

- Increase of 91 approved consultant posts since August 2020. Further increases are planned as part of the HSE National Service Plan.

These additional consultants and other senior decision makers will support the delivery of shorter waiting times, the reduction of hospital admissions, improved patient flow, and earlier discharge of patients to the community.

The HSE intend to review the number of intern posts in a planned and targeted manner for July 2022 to ensure any increases in intern posts aligns with projected workforce planning and postgraduate training positions. The outcome of this review with the recommended number of intern places for July 2022 will be presented to the Department of Health, later this year.

The Department of Health supports this review and welcomes it as timely in line with health reforms due to COVID-19 and planned Sláintecare reforms.

### **Departmental Reports**

973. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he will commission a report on the role of vitamin D in immunological health as it relates to same, given the evidence that vitamin D has a causal relationship to SARS-CoV2 infection and Covid-19 disease and the evidence for population supplementation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13480/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** With regard to Vitamin D supplementation in the population, the Deputy is advised that the existing guidance on vitamin D was updated in November 2020 and advises that adults aged 65 and older to take a 15 microgram (600 IU) daily supplement for bone and muscle health.

An evidence synthesis paper on vitamin D and COVID-19 prepared for the NPHEP was discussed at its meeting on 28th January 2021. The NPHEP agreed that at present, there is insufficient high-quality evidence with respect to vitamin D in the prevention and treatment of COVID-19, and noted that ongoing developments, particularly Randomised Control Trials, in this area be monitored by the NPHEP with guidance reviewed accordingly.

The NPHEP agreed that efforts should be made to increase awareness of existing guidance. Adults spending increased time indoors or those who are housebound or in long-term residential care or have dark skin pigmentation are also recommended to take a daily vitamin D supplement.

These recommendations for the use of vitamin D are being incorporated into wider messaging, and additionally are being communicated across the health service, including nursing homes and social care settings, as necessary.

The Department of Health has recently written to the HSE and Nursing Homes Ireland to encourage implementation of guidance on vitamin D in nursing homes.

The Government will continue to look to the NPHEP to provide recommendations with regard to Vitamin D and COVID-19.

### **Vaccination Programme**

974. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the sequence of events includ-

ing timelines that take place to transport vaccines from the point of arrival into the country on a plane or ship to the point of administration; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13481/21]

**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**

975. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if the IT system used to record vaccines administered was upgraded, as expected, in January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13482/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The national Covid vaccination systems deployed in response to the pandemic, was upgraded in January and indeed continues to be developed and refined in response to the emerging needs of the Covid vaccination programme. Decisions regarding the definition of which cohorts/ groups of people will receive which vaccine, and in what type of location eg hospital, GP surgery, mass vaccination clinic, among others, can have significant impacts on the configuration of the system. A dedicated team with technical expertise within the HSE are engaged in this work with technical partners IBM and Salesforce.

### **Vaccination Programme**

976. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the capacity of the IT system used to record vaccines administered; if the IT system is capable of processing upwards of 40,000 records per day as will be required in April 2021 in order to meet the target of 1.2 million vaccinations that month; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13483/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Primary Care Services**

977. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health the reason the psychologist post at Celbridge primary care centre, County Kildare, remains unfilled while waiting lists for psychological treatment lengthen and young children's conditions deteriorate; the date for the post to be filled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13488/21]

**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**

978. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health the number of Covid-19 vaccinations given by county by first dose only and by first and second dose; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13489/21]

**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.

### **Cannabis for Medicinal Use**

979. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health his views on the fact that the Medicinal Cannabis Access Programme does not include the prescription and funding of Dutch products for patients with specific conditions; the progress being made in resolving this issue (details supplied); his views on the need for patients to access these products; the reason Dutch products are not included under the access programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13493/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** A prospective supplier of cannabis-based products can apply to the Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA), on behalf of the Minister, to have a cannabis-based product considered for inclusion in the Medicinal Cannabis Access Programme.

Cannabis-based products that can be used in the Medicinal Cannabis Access Programme are defined as ‘specified controlled drugs’ in legislation (SI 262/2019) and the definition outlines the specific requirements for those products.

The criteria that cannabis-based products must meet in order to be considered by the Minister for inclusion on the schedule are set out in the legislation and can be found in the operator guidance issued by the HPRA.

The manufacturers of the prescribed cannabis-based products availed of by patients (whose clinicians are licenced under the Misuse of Drugs Acts 1977-2016) from a pharmacy in the Netherlands have not sought to have their products included in the Medicinal Cannabis Access Programme.

Due to current Netherlands government policy, the prescribed cannabis-based oil formulations are not permitted to be commercially exported from the Netherlands but are only supplied in the Netherlands to Irish patients on an individual basis on foot of a valid medical prescription when presented to the appropriate pharmacy.

Representations were made to the Dutch authorities to facilitate the export of the products to Ireland. The Dutch authorities confirmed that the export of cannabis oils to foreign pharmacies or wholesalers is not permitted and that magistral preparations may only be provided directly to patients or their representative on the basis of a prescription.

In April 2020, as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic the Department initiated a collection and delivery process of cannabis-based products from the Netherlands to patients homes for patients of clinicians licenced under Section 14 of the Misuse of Drugs Acts to prescribe controlled substances to their patients and this was confirmed as a permanent measure in December 2020.

On commencement of the access programme clinicians and their patients can continue to avail of the licence pursuant to the Misuse of Drugs Acts 1977-2016.

### **Vaccination Programme**

980. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health if he plans to introduce a no fault compensation scheme to cover the Covid-19 vaccine programme in 2021; if the introduction of

such a scheme would require primary legislation; if so, when this legislation will be drafted and introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13495/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In June 2018, the Government agreed to the establishment of an Expert Group to review the law of torts and the current systems for the management of clinical negligence claims chaired by High Court Justice Charles Meenan.

The Expert Group examined the system from the perspective of the person who has made the claim to explore if there is a better way to deal effectively yet more sensitively with certain cases. In this process the Group also looked at the impact of tort legislation on the overall patient safety culture and open disclosure. Judge Meenan submitted the final report of the Expert Group on the Reform of the Law of Torts and the Current System for Managing Clinical Negligence Claims to my myself and the Minister of Justice in January 2020, prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Government subsequently published the Meenan report in December 2020.

One of the report's recommendations is that a compensation scheme be established to deal with certain vaccine damage claims.

On foot of a request from my Department, the Health Research Board (HRB) carried out an evidence review on vaccine injury redress programmes in other jurisdictions and this was completed in March 2019.

The Expert Group's report, in addition to the HRB's evidence review, and consultation with other Government Departments and relevant State agencies will inform the development of any proposals regarding the establishment of a compensation scheme, including the need for primary legislation.

### **Vaccination Programme**

981. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of a national vaccine registry and the planned national immunisation information system; if a national registry will be in place to collect information on Covid-19 immunisation in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13496/21]

**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.

### **Dental Services**

982. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health the funding allowance for the orthodontic department in Letterkenny University Hospital from 2011 to 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13499/21]

**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 Equipment**

983. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a new x-ray machine will

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be made available for the orthodontic department in Letterkenny University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13500/21]

**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.

### **Dental Services**

984. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when new dental chairs and spaces for surgeries will be made available to tackle the waiting lists for orthodontic treatment at Letterkenny University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13501/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Consultant Contracts**

985. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health if he plans to employ a full-time orthodontic consultant at Letterkenny University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13502/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Data**

986. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health the number of x-rays carried out in Donegal and Killybegs community hospitals in 2018, 2019 and 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13503/21]

**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 Staff**

987. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health the number of radiology staff working in Donegal and Killybegs community hospitals in 2018, 2019 and 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13504/21]

**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 Staff**

988. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health if there are plans to recruit further radiology staff in Donegal and Killybegs community hospitals; and if he will make a

statement on the matter. [13505/21]

**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 Data**

989. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients in 2020 who were referred from Donegal and Killybegs community hospitals to other community hospitals for x-rays; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13506/21]

**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 Appointments Status**

990. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) in County Donegal can expect to receive an appointment in Letterkenny University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13507/21]

**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.

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### **Hospital Car Parks**

991. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Health if hospital parking fees should be applied for HSE employees when attending a hospital to receive the Covid-19 vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13511/21]

**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**

992. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health if there is an explanation for the extraordinarily high incidence of Covid placentitis of which there were eleven cases reported worldwide up to November 2020 and four suspected cases in Ireland announced on 4 March 2021; and if he will provide any such explanation. [13514/21]

**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**

993. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health if the four stillbirths in Ireland suspected to be linked to Covid placentitis were recorded as Covid-19 related deaths; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13515/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Department of Health has been informed of four reports of stillbirth potentially associated with a complication of COVID-19 known as Covid placentitis.

Two of the four stillbirths associated with COVID-19 have been notified to HPSC on CIDR as COVID-19 deaths and are included in the COVID-19 deaths total. The notification of the remaining two cases as COVID-19 deaths is under review/investigation.

These reports should be interpreted with caution as coroners have not yet concluded their findings. While COVID placentitis is a recognised pathological entity, this is an evolving area of practice and the pathophysiology of this condition is not fully understood.

International experience generally suggests there has been no increase in stillbirths since the pandemic began.

The HSE's National Women and Infants Programme is aware of and is monitoring the situation and has issued a related notice to obstetric departments.

### **Primary Care Centres**

994. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health when primary care services and a new primary care facility will be established in Tullow, County Carlow; the timescale for this service to be established; the planned location of the facility; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13518/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the HSE has responsibility for the

provision, along with the maintenance and operation of Primary Care Centres and other Primary Care facilities, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

### **Hospital Services**

995. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health if the outpatient service at Mullingar Regional Hospital is still under consideration for temporary relocation to a hospital (details supplied) in view of the recent announcement of increased investment in the outpatient department. [13532/21]

**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.

### **Hospital Services**

996. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health if Mullingar Regional Hospital is still considering relocating its paediatric emergency department to its current outpatient department given the recent announcement of increased investment in the outpatient department. [13533/21]

**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.

### **Hospital Services**

997. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health if provisions have been made to ensure that the paediatric emergency department at Mullingar Regional Hospital will be able to function within social distance guidelines if the outpatient service is not relocated to a hospital (details supplied) on a temporary basis. [13534/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is an operational matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

*Question No. 998 answered with Question No. 772.*

### **Vaccination Programme**

999. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the reason only 8,630 vaccines (details supplied) had been administered at the end of February 2021 out of a total received of 40,200; the reason the proportion of such vaccines administered out of those received is significantly lower than other vaccines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13537/21]

**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**

1000. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the status of the completion date for the transfer of shares from a group to a company (details supplied); if his attention has been drawn to ongoing public concern in relation to the new maternity hospital in respect of protecting the investment as a public asset and in respect of religious influence from the company; and the latest position on the matter. [13538/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Deputy may wish to note that the approval of the HSE is required to facilitate the transfer by the Religious Sisters of Charity of their shareholding in St Vincent's Healthcare Group (SVHG) to *St Vincent's Holdings CLG*. I understand that the SVHG has sought this approval and engagement between the parties is ongoing.

The Deputy can be assured that I fully appreciate the need to protect the State's investment in the new National Maternity Hospital (NMH). My Department and the HSE have had very significant engagement with NMH and SVHG to agree the legal framework, the overall objective of which is to ensure that the new hospital will remain in State ownership, and that health services at the hospital will be provided without religious, ethnic or other distinction or ethos.

The development of the legal framework has proved to be more protracted than originally anticipated; however, I am hopeful that discussions will be concluded, and the drafting of the legal documents finalised, in the coming weeks. Once finalised, the legal framework will be brought to Government for approval.

### Departmental Advertising

1001. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Health the amount spent across his Department on advertising in relation to Covid-19 by month and by media outlet (details supplied) from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021. [13561/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The information requested by the Deputy is being collated by Department officials and a deferred reply will be submitted within ten working days.

As this question is also relevant to the Health Service Executive, I have asked them to reply directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

### Animal Breeding Regulations

1002. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on correspondence in relation to pedigree boer goat breeders (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12490/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department has been proactive in terms of its engagement with breed societies and pedigree breeders and is currently assisting Irish breeders including representatives of the Boer Goats explore their options so they can continue to enter their purebred breeding animals in breeding books now that the UK has left the Union. These options include establishing a breed society in Ireland, entering their animals in another EU recognised breed society for the same breed in Ireland or another member state.

My Department has recognised and approved a significant number of new breed societies under Animal Breeding legislation.

Unfortunately, there is no funding available to assist the establishment of a breed society in Ireland.

### **Forestry Sector**

1003. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the person or body responsible for introducing a policy change (details supplied) to the forestry planting programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12491/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The decision to limit the amount of unenclosed land being planted to 20% of any one application and to reduce grants and premiums for such land was made by the Department in 2010. The decision was made based on economic, environmental and value for money reasons and informed by EU Commission views on forestry and environment policy, both at the time and subsequently in bilateral discussions.

The issue of afforestation on unenclosed land will be examined in the context of the implementation of the Mackinnon report which has made specific recommendations on land availability and suitability. I am implementing this through Project Woodland and have specifically tasked one of the working groups with examining this issue in more detail.

### **Horse Racing Industry**

1004. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when point-to-point racing will resume; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12516/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Horse Racing Ireland (HRI) is a commercial state body established under the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001, and is responsible for the overall administration, promotion and development of the horse racing industry.

Government has requested that Point-to-Point racing be discontinued under current regulations relating to COVID-19. HRI has informed my Department that this request is being complied with.

The pre-eminence of the protection of public health in the current pandemic situation is at the fore of such considerations.

The situation will continue to be actively monitored.

### **Horse Sport Ireland**

1005. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if Horse Sport Ireland signed a lease for a centre (details supplied) on 1 March 2021; if proper procedures and protocols have been followed in the process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12604/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) is a company limited by guarantee. It is not a State Body established by legislation and it is operationally independent of my Department.

I am advised that a selection process to decide on a site and location for its new Headquarters and Centre of Excellence was carried out by a sub-committee of the Board. HSI advises that the work of the sub-committee has been ongoing for two years and has involved the consideration of many different locations. It engaged with a range of potential sites and hired a property valuer and advisor to review property and land offerings as well as availability of property to purchase, rent or develop.

HSI appointed an independent consultant to carry out a detailed feasibility study in this regard, following a competitive request for tender. This report is currently being examined by my Department along with the draft lease. Following this process, it is a decision for the Board of HSI regarding the new site and venue for its Headquarters and Centre of Excellence.

### **Meat Processing Plants**

1006. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 485 and 486 of 10 December 2020, the out-turn at year end; the meat plants concerned for the breach of trim regulations and the dates; the number of times plants have had to revert to mechanical grading in 2022; the breaches of carcass trim, the dates and plants involved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12622/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2017/1184 of 20 April 2017 governs the monitoring of carcase classification, carcase presentation and weighing. In 2020, officers from the Carcase Classification Division of my Department conducted 420 inspections across 32 factories. Over 37,000 carcasses were inspected.

The average number of inspections in 2020 per factory was 13 and the average number of carcasses inspected at each inspection was 89. The legal requirement is eight inspections per year and a minimum of 40 carcasses at each inspection. These inspection figures significantly exceed the numbers required under the relevant EU legislation.

These unannounced checks by classification officers verify the ongoing accuracy of the automated beef grading methods by using a system of points and limits defined in EU legislation. The mechanical classification method must operate within legally defined tolerances at all times. When any mechanical system is found to be working outside of these tolerances, the meat plants concerned are instructed to revert to manual grading. Farmers are advised through their remittance dockets where manual grading is applied.

The suspension of mechanical grading following an inspection by DAFM occurred on four occasions in 2020 and the factories in questions were instructed to revert to manual grading. In all instances, classification officers from my Department conducted a classification check before a factory was allowed to recommence mechanical grading.

During these 420 inspections, classification officers also monitored compliance with the EU reference carcase presentation specification. Monitoring of carcase presentation continues to be carried out by my Department's Veterinary Public Health staff based in the factories, on a daily basis.

In 2020, one factory has been fined for non-compliance with carcase presentation, details of which are published on the Department Website. Any payments made to a Farmer Supplier, including in relation to issues such as this, are a matter between the Farmer/Supplier and the Processor/plant.

### **Animal Diseases**

1007. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if steps are being taken by his Department following the outbreak of a deadly strain of neurological equine herpes on mainland Europe (details supplied). [12664/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department is proactively monitoring the on-going outbreak of Equine Herpesvirus-1 (EHV-1) in horses in continental Europe. My officials met with representatives of Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) and the Irish Equine Centre (IEC) to develop an appropriate risk mitigating response. HSI, in consultation with my Department and the IEC have published a protocol for sport horses arriving in Ireland from high risk areas of Europe outlining the measures that horse owners should take to mitigate the risk of spread. I strongly endorse the recommendations in this EHV-1 protocol that requires all those competing horses, on returning to Ireland, to isolate and carry out two PCR tests prior to completing quarantine. This is critical to the protection of our sector.

Whilst Equine Herpesvirus-1 is not a notifiable disease, given the extent that the virus seems to have spread across Europe and the description of the clinical outcome, I would urge all players in the equine industry to respond to the increased risk that this poses to the equine population in Ireland and to double down on their biosecurity practices and measures.

My officials continue to liaise closely with industry stakeholders, the Irish Equine Centre and colleagues in Northern Ireland on this matter.

### **GLAS Issues**

1008. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a decision was made on the request by persons (details supplied) in County Kerry to have the penalty applied to their GLAS payment reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12684/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The person named was selected for an on farm inspection in 2020 and was notified of the findings by letter dated 5th February 2021. This letter outlined the option of appeal to the GLAS Section, Johnstown Castle, Co. Wexford.

The person named subsequently submitted a request for a review of the inspection findings to my Department's Limerick Office on 16th February 2021. This request is currently being processed and the review will be carried out by a Regional Inspector in due course.

The applicant will be informed directly, in writing, of the outcome once the review has been completed.

### **Harbours and Piers**

1009. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the way in which the €3 million capital funding in Howth harbour in 2020 was spent under the fishery harbour and coastal infrastructure development programme. [12695/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Howth Fishery Harbour Centre (FHC) is one of the six designated Fishery Harbour Centres which are

owned, managed and maintained by my Department under Statute.

Capital funding is made available on an annual basis by my Department to the Fishery Harbour Centres, via the Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme.

The table below provides a breakdown of the circa €3 million capital funding spent in Howth Fishery Harbour Centre in 2020.

Project Name	€
Middle Pier Berthing Face	1,288,864
Claremont Storage Units - Construction	941,532
Safety and Maintenance	293,035
Harbour Dredging - Design & Permit	215,040
Synchrolift Upgrade/Repair	148,829
Boatyard Upgrade	99,428
Harbour Workshop - Construction	51,143
Disability Access	19,953
Total	3,057,824

### Food Imports

1010. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the food import supply issues that have arisen due to Brexit; and if he will provide a detailed list of those items being delayed or no longer available to the Irish market. [12742/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Brexit presents very serious challenges for the agriculture sector, despite the Trade and Cooperation Agreement reached between the EU and the UK. Non-tariff barriers are resulting in increased costs for businesses, as well as delays and other impacts on supply chains. Traders are generally coming to terms with the reality of the changes that have come about since 1st January 2021, although the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland ensures that many of the changes arising from Brexit will not arise on the island of Ireland.

My Department is implementing checks and controls on agri-food goods arriving at Border Control Posts, in accordance with EU legislation. It continues to actively engage with a wide range of businesses and operators, including retailers, on both a bilateral basis and through the various consultative fora such as the Retail Roundtable chaired by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, and the Food Safety Authority of Ireland's Retail Forum. These engagements are aimed at fostering a full understanding of the requirements to be met by operators responsible for consignments, and at resolving any issues in relation to, for example, the submission of documents. To date, we have not been made aware of any significant supply issues or specific difficulties in relation to particular products being delayed or no longer available to the Irish market.

I remain strongly engaged on this issue, but the reality is that this is a very complex area, and fundamental changes have arisen as a result of the UK decision to leave the Single Market and the Customs Union. This will ultimately affect overall trade flows between Ireland and Great Britain in ways that have yet to be fully determined.

### Agriculture Industry

1011. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the rules governing membership of a group (details supplied) a European Innovation Partnership Locally Led Pilot project; the commonage rights and obligations in relation to participation in the group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12774/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Blackstairs Farming Future (BFF) project is a European Innovation Partnership Locally Led Pilot Project. The BFF project is run by the Blackstairs Farming Future Project Team.

I understand that the BFF project is governed and bound by the BFF Terms and Conditions For Participating Commonages. The commonage rights and obligations in relation to participation in the group are contained within these terms and conditions and are available upon request from the Project Team.

### **Seafood Sector**

1012. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will publish the terms of reference of the recently established seafood sector task-force. [12795/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The terms of Reference of the Seafood Sector Task Force are published at the link below.

*<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/55014-seafood-sector-task-force/>*

### **Milk Quota**

1013. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if there is a mechanism available to apply for a refund of a penalty that was applied to a person for over production under the milk quota regime; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12811/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Milk Quota regime required a quota being fixed for each individual producer, milk purchaser and Member State. A levy was applied for those who exceeded their quota. In the final years of the quota regime, a levy for over-production was only applied to a producer in the event of their co-op and the Member State also being over quota.

Following the end of the Milk Quota regime in 2015, my Department introduced a Super Levy Instalment Scheme, which allowed applicants spread settlement of their outstanding super levy between 2015 and 2017. To facilitate this, an agreement document outlining the full amount due and the terms for repayment was drawn up by DAFM and signed by both the debtor and a creamery representative.

Correspondence from my Department in relation to debts or liabilities deemed owing generally contains information pertaining to a right of appeal, the terms and conditions attaching to any such appeal and the timeframe in which such an appeal may be made.

Given that the question is general in nature, it is not possible to give specific detail outlining whether a right of appeal was advised or if it is the 2014/2015 instalment agreement which is in question.

## Forestry Sector

1014. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if afforestation initiatives will be included in the pilot agri-environment scheme being developed by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12830/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Programme for Government commits to rewarding farmers for adapting to more sustainable methods of farming and to the development of a new agri-environment scheme capable of delivering broad environmental and biodiversity benefits that will align financial supports with climate objectives. To advance this objective, funding has been made available for an agri-environment pilot project. It is proposed to do this as a results-based project in order to align it with the principles of the next CAP.

The aim of this pilot project is to identify a suitable agri-environment results based scoring system and to trial this system at a national level with a view to identifying upscaling potential for possible inclusion in the next national agri-environment scheme. Under the results-based model, farm holdings with the highest scoring receive the greatest payment.

The details of this pilot project are currently being considered by my Department. A public consultation process ran from 29th January to 26th February and the submissions received are currently being reviewed. I expect the project details to be available and the application process to open in the second quarter of this year.

## Forestry Sector

1015. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of licence and scheme approvals his Department must issue each year in order to deliver on targets in relation to schemes (details supplied); the number for each licence and scheme type individually in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12831/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Forestry Programme 2014 -2020 sets down specific targets for delivery of areas planted and roads built. The Climate Action Plan 2019 reset the target for afforestation at 8,000 ha per annum and the target of forest road works at 125km per annum. In addition, a goal of 30% broad-leaf planting is included in the Forestry Programme 2014 - 2020. While there are no specific targets for felling, the Coford Roundwood Forecast predicts a felling requirement of 4.1 million cubic metres in 2021.

The table attached outlines approvals for the period 2015 -2020, measures as number of licences for each category issued in each of the years.

In terms of afforestation, my Department continues to receive and issue forestry licences daily. The area covered by issued afforestation licences so far this year is 910ha. 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.

Felling licences were necessarily prioritised in the latter months of 2020 to ensure a steady

supply of timber into sawmills. I am mindful of the seasonality associated with afforestation and therefore have prioritised those for the coming weeks and while other forestry licence types will continue to issue, afforestation will be the priority.

As regards felling, some three million m<sup>3</sup> has issued since last August. Coillte now has 100% of its 2021 licensing requirement issued albeit not of all it immediately available. My Department continues to work with Coillte to resolve any issues to making their licenced material available.

In terms of road construction my Department has licensed double the forest roads at 50km in the first two months of this year compared to the same period last year. The annual target is 125km as set out in the Climate Action Plan so this target is well on track to be met.

In relation to broadleaf planting overall, in 2020 the 30% target was exceeded at 34% which means that approximately a third of all trees planted were broadleaves.

As regards Native Woodlands, the level of planting has been steadily increasing, and was the highest on record in 2020, equalling the annual target of 450ha set at the beginning of the Forestry Programme.

Other schemes such as the Neighbourwood Scheme, the Woodland Improvement Scheme and the Reconstitution and Underplanting (Ash Dieback) schemes are very much demand led. While we actively encourage participation in these schemes by those to whom they might apply, they are voluntary schemes.

We have set ourselves a target of issuing 4,500 licences in 2021 and a new structure under Project Woodland, is being introduced to ensure that the current backlog is addressed and that a new impetus is brought to woodland creation in Ireland. This Project will involve a review and refresh of our processes and procedures and will include outside stakeholder participation to bring an independent perspective. It will be a task-driven process, with clear deliverable and milestones. We have set ourselves a very ambitious target of 4,500 new licences this year which represents a 74% increase on 2020.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-10\_pq1015-10-03-21\_en.docx">table</a>]

### **Forestry Sector**

1016. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the person or body responsible for representing forestry and particularly afforestation on the present CAP post-2020 consultative committee; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12832/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Deputy might be aware that the current Forestry Programme 2014-2020 is entirely exchequer funded and received State aid approval from the European Commission. A request for extension of this State aid approval to the end of 2022 was granted at the end of last year, which means that the current programme will be finished at the same time as the current Rural Development Programme.

As set out in the Programme for Government, this Government is committed to a new national Forestry Programme, following the current programme, which will benefit farmers, the sector, the environment and society at large. We are also committed to better integration

between the new National Forestry Programme and the next CAP to ensure that the measures in both complement each other.

The CAP post-2020 Consultative Committee includes all relevant stakeholders that represent organisations and activities that will be part of Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan. Many of my Department's officials who work in forestry related divisions are represented on Department internal working groups and committees in which my Department's approach to the CAP Strategic Plan are discussed. Through participation in these groups and committees, forestry has been contributing to the briefing on the CAP Strategic Plan draft Regulations and is helping us to meet our commitment of better integration between these two significant programmes.

### **Forestry Sector**

1017. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of an application to the ash dieback scheme by a person (details supplied). [12877/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** An application for the Reconstitution and Under Planting (Ash Dieback) Scheme was submitted on behalf of the person named in November, 2020.

The application was referred to a Forestry inspector of my Department and a referral issued to the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). A response was received from NPWS in late February. This is currently being considered as part of the overall application assessment and a decision will issue in due course.

### **Departmental Internships**

1018. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under his aegis in 2019; the cost in terms of wages and allowances; and the estimated numerical capacity of State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis. [12948/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine welcomes students to take part in internships and to avail of work experience throughout our divisions and subdivisions. These positions are fully paid and all students are mentored by experienced members of staff. All students are remunerated at point one of the clerical officer pay scale. Thirty five students availed of work experience or internships in 2019.

My Department is a long time supporter of providing employment opportunities for persons with disabilities and has participated for many years in the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) Programme. This programme provides a six-month paid and mentored work placement for graduates with a disability. Four paid and mentored placements were facilitated in 2019 under the WAM programme. WAM participants are remunerated at point one of the executive officer pay scale.

The attached document shows current Civil Service salary pay scales.

The capacity of State Bodies to provide work experience is an operational matter for the bodies themselves. I have referred this query to the State Bodies under the aegis of my Department and have asked that they respond directly to the Deputy.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-10\_pq1018-10-03-21\_en.pdf">payscales</a>]

### Land Issues

1019. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide details of who may access the Land Commission records; the beneficial interest if any they must demonstrate in the land; the person or body that decides on access requests; the annual requests there have been for access to these records in each year since 2016; the number that have been refused; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13028/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Decisions relating to access to the records of the former Irish Land Commission are made by officials in my Department's Records Branch which has a storage facility located in Portlaoise. Owners and purchasers and/or their personal/legal representatives are granted access to certain documents by prior consultation with that office. Access is only permitted where documentary evidence of ownership or entitlement to ownership to the lands in question is provided, together with payment of the prescribed fee. The Property Registration Authority is also granted access to certain documentation, on request, to allow for the completion of current and past transactions and for the full completion of the work of the former Commission.

The following table represents the number of search and retrieval requests processed by Records branch staff from 2016 to date. There are no statistics available relating to whether any requests were refused.

Year	Number of requests
2016	1,117
2017	949
2018	990
2019	1,120
2020	1,405
2021 (to date)	338

### Covid-19 Pandemic

1020. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the level Ireland will need to be at before events such as agricultural shows are allowed to run safely under Covid-19 rules; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13032/21]

1021. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the level of Covid-19 restrictions that agricultural shows will be permitted to run behind closed doors with exhibitors only in attendance adhering to Covid-19 guidelines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13033/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1020 and 1021 together.

For public health reasons, the Government has advised that people should stay at home except in a number of situations, which includes travelling to and from work where the work is considered to be an essential service. Those essential services and other important information are published on [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie) and Regulations are in place to support these measures. The

measures are made based on expert advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and are kept under ongoing review by that group, with the over-riding consideration being the protection of public health in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic.

I fully appreciate and acknowledge the positive benefits that these shows provide to the agricultural and wider rural communities and I am eager to see their resumption. However, decisions regarding the holding of these events, will only be made in the context of overall national strategies in relation to protecting public health.

### **Road Improvement Schemes**

1022. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if funding will be provided to assist farmers in the construction of agricultural underpass crossings on non-national roads in which such facilities are deemed essential in the interests of public safety and particularly road safety; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13073/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** There are a wide variety of items available under the suite of seven measures under TAMS II. However, funding for cattle underpasses are not included. The financial allocation in respect of TAMS for the full Rural Development Programme period is €395m. To date, total expenditure under the seven measures of the TAMS, including transitional expenditure, has reached in excess of €272m with commitments of an additional €142m made to scheme participants who have yet to draw down those commitments.

Some 37,226 applications have been approved under the scheme. All outstanding approvals issued represent potential outstanding liabilities for my Department and we must have a budget in place to pay these claims. As a result, it is not possible to consider adding additional items such as cattle underpasses to the comprehensive list of investment items already available under TAMS II.

### **Animal Diseases**

1023. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will prioritise making equine herpes a notifiable disease in light of an outbreak of EHV-1 in Valencia, the most serious outbreak in Europe for decades and the imminent possibility of the virus arriving in the State with horses being transported from Spain; and if so, when. [13134/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Equine Herpesvirus-1 (EHV-1) is a herpes virus that is widely distributed across the world, including in Ireland. It usually manifests as a respiratory or reproductive disease and occasionally in a paralytic form. The primary risk mitigating measures are biosecurity and vaccination. Given its ubiquitous nature and the availability of a vaccine, EHV-1 is not a notifiable disease and I have no plans at this time to make it a notifiable disease.

Given the extent that the virus seems to have spread across Europe and the description of the clinical outcome, my Department is monitoring the situation closely. My officials met with representatives of Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) and the Irish Equine Centre (IEC) to develop an appropriate risk mitigating response. HSI, in consultation with my Department and the IEC have published a protocol for sport horses arriving in Ireland from high risk areas of Europe outlining the measures that horse owners should take to mitigate the risk of spread. I strongly endorse

the recommendations in this protocol that requires all those competing horses, on returning to Ireland, to isolate and carry out two tests prior to completing quarantine. This is critical to the protection of our sector.

My officials continue to liaise closely with industry stakeholders and colleagues in Northern Ireland on this matter. I would urge all players in the equine industry to respond to the increased risk that this poses to the equine population in Ireland and to double down on their biosecurity practices and measures.

### **Animal Diseases**

1024. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps his Department will take to prevent the equine herpes virus from entering Ireland (details supplied). [13142/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department is monitoring the on-going outbreak of Equine Herpesvirus-1 in horses in continental Europe. My officials met with representatives of Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) and the Irish Equine Centre (IEC) to develop an appropriate risk mitigating response. HSI, in consultation with my Department and the IEC have published a protocol for sport horses arriving in Ireland from high risk areas of Europe outlining the measures that horse owners should take to mitigate the risk of spread. I strongly endorse the recommendations in this protocol that requires all those competing horses, on returning to Ireland, to isolate and carry out two tests prior to completing quarantine. This is critical to the protection of our sector.

Whilst Equine Herpesvirus-1 is not a notifiable disease, given the extent that the virus seems to have spread across Europe and the description of the clinical outcome, I would urge all players in the equine industry to respond to the increased risk that this poses to the equine population in Ireland and to double down on their biosecurity practices and measures.

My officials continue to liaise closely with industry stakeholders and colleagues in Northern Ireland on this matter.

### **Beekeeping Industry**

1025. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if steps will be taken to protect the native Irish bee population in light of an identified threat (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13165/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I fully acknowledge the important contribution bees make to agriculture and biodiversity as both pollinators and honey producers. In this regard, my Department provides a range of supports and initiatives to encourage and assist beekeepers and the national beekeeping associations. These supports include provision of a free disease diagnostic service for Irish beekeepers to help maintain the health of the bee population, funding to carry out applied research through the National Apiculture Programme, grants to national beekeeping associations and also grant aid to fund capital investments for beekeepers.

In relation to the importation of honeybees into Ireland, this is allowed under regulations governing intra-Community trade with other EU Member States. The specific health requirements for trading in bees are laid out in Council Directive 92/65/EEC. All imports of bees must

be accompanied by a health certificate issued by the country of export. The reason for this is to ensure that imported bees are healthy and do not harbour pathogens or parasites that may be harmful to our native bee stocks, including the small hive beetle (*Aethina tumida*).

The importation of bees into the UK via Northern Ireland is a UK internal matter.

### **Coillte Teoranta**

1026. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to the existing policy that offers indemnity to private land owners, whose land is crossed by a registered horse trail, if there is an accident; and if a similar policy will be considered that would allow indemnity on public land that would include land owned by Coillte to allow for the expansion of horse trails. [13189/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Indemnity for land owners in respect of the use of their land for recreational horse riding by third parties is not a matter for my Department.

In relation to Coillte, 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 its 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.

### **Animal Diseases**

1027. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the actions he has taken in response to reports of a rapid evolution of an aggressive strain of the neurological form of EHV-1 originating from Valencia that has resulted in outbreaks in Europe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13200/21]

1028. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the contacts he and his officials have had with their counterparts in the Northern Ireland Executive with regard to EHV-1; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13201/21]

1029. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the quarantine and testing arrangements that have been put in place since his Department was notified of outbreaks of EHV-1 on the continent; when such measures were put in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13202/21]

1030. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he sought the advice of the chief veterinary officer in relation to the recent outbreak of EHV-1; if details of the advice received will be made available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13203/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1027 to 1030, inclusive together.

My Department is monitoring the on-going outbreak of Equine Herpesvirus-1 in horses in continental Europe. My Chief Veterinary Officer and relevant officials met with representatives of Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) and the Irish Equine Centre (IEC) to develop an appropriate risk

mitigating response. HSI, in consultation with my Department and the IEC have published a protocol for sport horses arriving in Ireland from high risk areas of Europe outlining the measures that horse owners should take to mitigate the risk of spread. I strongly endorse the recommendations in this protocol that requires all those competing horses, on returning to Ireland, to isolate and carry out two tests prior to completing quarantine. This is critical to the protection of our sector.

My officials continue to liaise closely with industry stakeholders and colleagues in Northern Ireland on this matter.

Equine Herpesvirus-1 (EHV-1) is a herpes virus that is widely distributed across the world, including in Ireland. It usually manifests as a respiratory or reproductive disease and occasionally in a paralytic form. The primary risk mitigating measures are biosecurity and vaccination. Given its ubiquitous nature and the availability of a vaccine, EHV-1 is not a notifiable disease and I have no plans at this time to make it a notifiable disease.

Given the extent that the virus seems to have spread across Europe and the description of the clinical outcome, I would urge all players in the equine industry to respond to the increased risk that this poses to the equine population in Ireland and to double down on their biosecurity practices and measures.

### **Brexit Issues**

1031. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount of the animal and plant safety documentation involved in the new UK to Ireland animal and plant health checks that is handled electronically arising from the EU-UK Free Trade Agreement; the amount handled by way of the presentation or use of paper documentation; if paper documentation is used, when is it planned to migrate to an electronic system of plant and animal health safety controls and check; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13215/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The requirements for animal and plant safety documentation are laid down in the Plant Health Regulation (EU) 2016/2031, the Official Controls Regulation (EU) 2017/625 and the IMSOC Regulation (EU) 2019/1715. These requirements apply to all imports of such commodities into the European Union, regardless of whether the country has a free trade agreement with the EU or not.

All documentation required can be handled electronically. The requirement to submit certain information, in advance of the arrival of the consignment, as well as for the border official to certify that the consignment complies with the requirements, is handled through European Commission's online platform called the Trade Expert and Control System (TRACES for short). Also in advance of arrival, importers can upload copies of documentation required for import controls (health certificates, customs declarations, commercial invoices etc) to an IT system specially built by DAFM (Import Notification Inspection System (INIS) Portal) to handle the very significant increase in demand for import controls following the departure of the UK from the European Union. Uploading of all documentation required in advance, facilitates checks in advance and the detection of problems before the consignments are presented at the border control post.

Whilst all documentation can be handled electronically, there is still a legal requirement at EU level for original paper health certificates to be submitted. Work is under way at EU level to

replace the requirement for paper health certificates with electronic health certificates. This is a complex process as it requires electronic compatibility between systems in countries exporting to the EU, and EU systems. It also requires the development of solutions that will ensure the security of such certificates. However, my Department is committed to working through this.

### **Control of Horses**

1032. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the percentage of horses that are microchipped nationally; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13340/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The legislation governing the identification of equines is Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2015/262, as transposed into national legislation via S.I. 62 of 2016.

As required by Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2015/262, my Department's central equine database records the registration details of equines issued with passports by approved Passport Issuing Organisations (PIOs) in the State as well as the registration details of equines resident in Ireland but issued with passports by approved PIOs outside the State. These database registrations date back to 1st January 1980.

Of the live equines recorded on the central equine database, 55% have microchip numbers associated with them. It should be noted that 51% of all live equines recorded on the database were identified with passports prior to 1st July 2009 and therefore are not required to be implanted with a microchip.

The identity of an equine is determined by the unique equine life number (UELN) assigned by an approved passport issuing organisation (PIO) to the single lifetime identification document (passport) issued in respect of that equine. While the microchip number is recorded on the passport and provides a link between the animal and its identification document, the microchip is not an identification mechanism in its own right.

All equines in respect of which a passport issued from 1st July 2009 are required to be implanted with a microchip, the number of which must be recorded on the passport document. All equines issued with a passport prior to 1st July 2009 are deemed to be properly identified in accordance with this legislation and accordingly are not required to be implanted with a microchip.

### **Fishing Industry**

1033. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will report on his efforts over recent months to secure a fair burden sharing of the fish quota loss arising from the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement amongst the fishing fleets of the affected EU member states as called for by the affected fishing industry here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13346/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) will, unfortunately, have an 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.

There is, however, one key element in the final negotiation outcome which gives rise to major concern and dissatisfaction in Ireland and this relates to the disproportionate payment Ireland was required to make towards the final fish quota transfer package to the UK.

I wish to assure the Deputy that this Government intends to continue to keep the focus on this very undesirable situation and to use any opportunity available to seek constructive solutions that would help to alleviate this unacceptable position.

On 20th January, I met with Michel Barnier, the EU Fisheries Commissioner and the Ministers of the Fisheries Group of 8 on fisheries related matters post-Brexit. I raised this matter of inequitable burden sharing directly at this meeting.

I also raised this matter at EU Fisheries Councils in both January and February. At the February meeting, I put forward a practical proposal to seek an exchange from the UK of mackerel for North Sea whitefish on the basis of a proposal from the Irish industry. However, this was rejected by all relevant Member States.

I raised the matter once more at a meeting held on 2nd March with the Ambassadors to Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg, where I expressed my keenness to see the solidarity so evident before the conclusion of the TCA continue to find ways to reduce this imbalance. I also reminded the Ambassadors that Ireland contributes the largest fishing grounds to the CFP.

### **Fishing Industry**

1034. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the advice or briefings that the office of the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Defence received from his Department ahead of the Minister's meeting with the French Minister for European and Foreign Affairs in Paris on 3 December 2020. [13347/21]

**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 the EU had directly linked progress on an overall trade deal 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.

The briefing material provided to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Defence in relation to fisheries in the context of the Minister for Foreign Affairs meeting with the French Minister for European and Foreign Affairs in Paris on 3 December 2020 provided detailed background and analysis and made clear that any outcome in the future relationship negotiations that resulted in a loss of quota share for the EU would be severely damaging to both the Irish and French fishing industries.

It set down the concerns about restriction or denial of access to EU waters and the likely associated displacement of EU fishing activity into Ireland's zone. It emphasised that Ireland's position was to require the status quo be maintained for both quotas and access to all fishing grounds enjoyed by the UK and EU vessels.

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.

### **Beekeeping Industry**

1035. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he has received representations from an organisation (details supplied) in relation to the potential threat to beekeepers here from the small hive beetle further to reports regarding the importation of bees into the UK via Northern Ireland from Italy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13377/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The importation of bees into the UK via Northern Ireland is a UK internal matter.

### **Animal Diseases**

1036. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if horses entering Ireland are being tested for herpes virus in order to protect the equine industry (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13387/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Equine Herpesvirus-1 (EHV-1) is a herpes virus that is widely distributed across the world, including in Ireland. It usually manifests as a respiratory or reproductive disease and occasionally in a paralytic form. The primary risk mitigating measures are biosecurity and vaccination.

My Department continues to monitor the on-going outbreak of Equine Herpesvirus-1 in horses in continental Europe. My Chief Veterinary Officer and relevant officials met with representatives of Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) and the Irish Equine Centre (IEC) to develop an appropriate risk mitigating response. HSI, in consultation with my Department and the IEC have published a protocol for sport horses arriving in Ireland from high risk areas of Europe outlining the measures that horse owners should take to mitigate the risk of spread. I strongly endorse the recommendations in this protocol that requires all those competing horses, on returning to Ireland, to isolate and carry out two tests prior to completing quarantine. This is critical to the protection of our sector.

It should be noted that all horses coming into the country must be accompanied by a health certificate declaring that they clear of clinical signs of infectious disease.

Given the extent that the virus seems to have spread across Europe and the description of the clinical outcome, I would urge all players in the equine industry to respond to the increased risk that this poses to the equine population in Ireland and to double down on their biosecurity practices and measures.

### **Felling Licences**

1037. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a felling licence will be issued for a person (details supplied). [13415/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** An application for a tree felling licence for the person named was received in July 2019 and has been referred to my Department's Ecology Unit. The application site is near six designated sites, including the Ballyhoura Mountains and the Lower River Suir SACs. Therefore, the impact of any felling operations on the sites and the surrounding area, must be carefully considered before deciding on the licence application.

If the applicant wishes, 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.

### **Tuberculosis Incidence**

1038. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the total number and the number by county of cattle condemned as TB reactors in each of the years 2010 to 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13456/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The attached file provides the number of reactors by county from 2010 to 2020. While disease levels are low relative to historical levels, the number of reactors has been gradually increasing since 2016. The pace of deterioration has accelerated in 2020.

Outbreaks of bovine TB within each county require a range of actions to address the problem. Within each county, the TB programme focuses on wildlife, how disease is distributed in the area, contiguous programmes, gamma interferon testing, cleansing and disinfection, testing compliance and frequency and isolation of reactors. Each TB outbreak is investigated by a veterinary inspector to identify the source of infection. In the case of outbreaks involving two or more standard reactors, there is a veterinary visit to advise the herdowner on how to eliminate infection and necessary measures to assist in reducing the risk of recurrence.

My Department is engaged with all stakeholders through the TB Forum. The recently launched Bovine TB Eradication Strategy 2021-2030 is a step towards the eradication of the disease. This new TB Strategy and further information is available on [www.bovinetb.ie](http://www.bovinetb.ie)

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-10\_pq1038-10-03-21\_en.xlsx">table</a>]

### **Tuberculosis Eradication Programme**

1039. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the expenditure on the TB eradication programme in each of the years 2010 to 2020; the amount of EU funding received in relation to same for each of those years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13457/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** While TB disease is low relative to historical levels, the number of new restrictions and reactor numbers have been gradually increasing since 2016. The pace of deterioration has accelerated in 2020.

My Department is engaged with all stakeholders through the TB Forum to ensure all aspects of the recently launched new Bovine TB Eradication Strategy 2021-2030 are addressed to move toward the eradication of the disease. This new TB Strategy and further information is available on [www.bovinetb.ie](http://www.bovinetb.ie).

The table attached shows the estimated overall costs of the programme from 2010 to 2020. EU funding has gradually decreased from a high of €12m in 2014. This is due to two factors, that TB is no longer seen as high priority by the EU in terms of co-funding and also because of the deteriorating disease situation here and perceived lack of progress in eliminating it. The EU commitment to funding is expected to reduce even further in the coming years. The farmer contribution is estimated as it includes a cost for testing which is paid directly by farmers to testing veterinary practitioners.

### **Tuberculosis Incidence**

1040. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason for the significant increase in TB infection rates over the past year; the measures he will enact to address this matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13458/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Following many successful years of reducing bovine TB levels to the benefit of Irish farmers, there has been concerning increases in the disease since 2016. This has continued in 2020 with further increases in herd incidence and reactor numbers observed. Herd incidence (on a 12-month rolling basis) has breached 4% for the first time since 2012 and reactor numbers have exceeded 22,000 – the highest number since 2009. These trends highlight the need for urgent action by all stakeholders to manage the risk more effectively across all transmission routes.

Whilst the immediate trends are disappointing, good progress has been made over the past decade. During 2009, 5,860 herds were subject to restriction whilst the number in 2020 was 4,624.

The reasons for the recent increase are multifactorial and often relate to a combination of national and local factors. The expansion of the dairy herd since 2015 has played a role in this, since dairy herds, larger herds, farm fragmentation and herds which introduce more cattle are all more at risk of TB breakdowns. Wildlife is also a factor.

As a result, a range of actions are required to address the problem. Within each county, the TB programme focuses on wildlife, how disease is distributed in the area, contiguous programmes, gamma interferon testing, cleansing and disinfection, testing compliance and frequency and isolation of reactors. Each TB outbreak is investigated by a veterinary inspector to identify the source of infection. In the case of outbreaks involving two or more standard reactors, there is a veterinary visit to advise the herdowner on how to eliminate infection and necessary measures to assist in reducing the risk of recurrence.

I recently launched a new Bovine TB Eradication Strategy 2021-2030. The implementation of this strategy will be overseen by the established TB Forum along with support from three working groups on science, implementation and finance, which will ensure 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 ongoing basis. This new TB Strategy is available on [www.bovinetb.ie](http://www.bovinetb.ie).

At the most recent TB Forum meeting on Thursday 4th February 2021, it was agreed by all stakeholders that extensive consultation within three working groups will develop a shared

understanding of how collectively we can reduce TB incidence along with implementing the new TB Eradication Strategy. My Department remains committed to reducing and ultimately eradicating TB in Ireland as demonstrated by the recent sanctioning of an additional 16 field officers to assist the TB Programme.

Attaining TB-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 TB restriction represents a significant emotional and financial challenge to the farm family concerned.

I will work with all stakeholders in ensuring fewer herdowners experience the challenges associated with a TB restriction.

### **Agriculture Schemes**

1041. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will give special consideration to young farmers who started farming since the closure of the last GLAS scheme to be eligible for the traditional farm building scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13470/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Traditional Farm Building Scheme (TFBS) is a complementary measure to GLAS, intended to encourage a holistic approach which increases understanding and management of both the natural and built/cultural heritage present on individual farms. Accordingly, participation in GLAS is the prime eligibility condition. The scheme is administered on behalf of the Department by the Heritage Council.

The current tranche of the Scheme opened on the 4 March 2021 and, to be eligible for the scheme, all applicants must be participants in GLAS. As this is a complementary measure to GLAS, any person who is not a participant in GLAS will be ineligible to apply.

### **Organic Farming Scheme**

1042. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if consideration has been given to extending the organics scheme criteria for applications due to the sharp rise in the cost of fertiliser; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13490/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I was very pleased to recently reopen the Organic Farming Scheme and I hope that as many farmers as possible are giving consideration to converting. Interested farmers will find a wealth of supporting and informative material available from my Department, Teagasc, the Organic Certification Bodies or from their farm adviser.

Applications will be accepted from all sectors and the scheme is currently open. Successful applications will be determined by a ranking and selection process in the event that the Scheme is over-subscribed. This selection process will allocate marks to each sector with the aim of increasing the area under organic production, while prioritising areas deemed to be in deficit. The areas deemed to be in deficit by the Organic Strategy Group are dairy, tillage and horticulture.

While the ranking and selection process will prioritise these areas, I believe that the level of funding provided for this new Scheme will facilitate the entry of 400-500 new farmers into the organic farming system. This should allow successful applications from enterprises other than

those deemed to be in deficit.

The closing date for receipt of applications is 30th April.

### **Beef Industry**

1043. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the actions he is taking with regard to beef prices for Irish farmers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13491/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** As the Deputy will be aware, prices for beef and other commodities is a commercial matter which I have no role in determining.

I am acutely aware of the recent price volatility in the beef sector and I am conscious that the sector is particularly exposed to factors such as COVID, given its reliance on external trade and the food service and hospitality markets.

My Department and I are working to ensure that business and services to farmers can continue, keeping food and other processing facilities operational, ensuring that payments and commercial activities that are necessary to protect farm incomes can continue. My Department is also working actively to ensure that Irish beef has access to as many high value markets as possible.

The nature of all markets is that the price will fluctuate especially in the case of market disturbance, as has been evidenced during the COVID-19 crisis and that caused by uncertainty surrounding Brexit. My Department provides a range of financial aids to support beef farm incomes and to support economic and environmental efficiency.

The core support for the beef sector under the current RDP is the €300 Million Beef Data and Genomics Programme. In addition to this support, over the last two years, over €200 million of additional supports were made available specifically to the beef sector, including the BEAM and BEEP schemes in 2019 and the Beef Finishers Payment and BEEP-S in 2020.

In Budget 2021, €85 million has been allocated for specific supports for sustainable beef farming. This includes over €40 million for the extension of the BDGP during the transition period before the next CAP. The Beef Sector Efficiency Pilot with an allocation of €40 million is due to be launched shortly.

Bord Bia's beef market tracker includes a comparison of a prime Irish composite price with a comparative export benchmark price based on a weighted average of our key export markets. This tracker was put in place as a result of the work of Beef Market Task Force and provides an additional measure of transparency in relation to beef prices, which is critically important. The Task Force has also commissioned Grant Thornton to conduct a series of market transparency studies. A meeting of the Taskforce was held this week with an update from Grant Thornton on its work to date.

I addressed the meeting where I expressed my concerns with the manner in which factories informed farmers over last month's price cut and changes to breed bonuses and weight limits.

A key component of the Programme for Government is the establishment of a Food Ombudsman and I am now considering how best to bring this forward and will be consulting with industry on it. I am also considering how to include price transparency and reporting as part of

its functions.

I can assure the Deputy that my Department is constantly monitoring the market situation for all agricultural commodities, including beef.

### **Beef Industry**

1044. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if legislation being introduced for the proposed food ombudsman will have powers to deliver transparency within the beef sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13492/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Programme for Government includes a commitment to:

*Ensure fairness, equity, and transparency in the food chain by establishing a new authority called the National Food Ombudsman (NFO) to enforce the Unfair Trading Practices Directive. This new authority will enforce EU-wide rules on prohibited unfair trading practices in the food supply chain and will have powers to enforce this Directive, penalising those who breach regulations.*

My Department is taking a two step approach to the establishment of the NFO (or equivalent office). Firstly, a statutory instrument will be drafted to transpose the UTP Directive by the deadline of 1st May 2021. This will provide for an Enforcement Authority which will have the powers as currently provided for in the Directive. The legislative and operational requirements for establishing a new Office of a Food Ombudsman or equivalent that might provide for functions other than those provided for in the UTP Directive are being examined. Primary legislation will be required both to establish this new authority, and to provide for any further powers which may be given to that office.

It is intended that there will shortly be a national consultation process on the possible functions of the NFO.

The UTP Directive does not address issues of price determination or negotiation. While the Programme for Government commitment provides that the new NFO (or equivalent office) will have a specific role in analysing and reporting on price and market data in Ireland, it is important to be aware that this authority will not have a role in determining price.

The Beef Taskforce work on price transparency, and the completion of the three market transparency studies commissioned by my Department, will be an important step towards improving visibility of the complex supply chain which is integral in fostering trust and enhancing supply chain relationships. These studies will act as an important starting point for driving increased transparency. It is more important than ever that we all work together given the unique set of challenges currently faced by the sector. Continued strong and constructive engagement in the Beef Taskforce is key to meeting these challenges.

### **Agriculture Industry**

1045. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if recognition will be given to farmers who participate in either aerobic digestion or biomass processes, either on-site or at a larger off-site location for the reduction in their nitrates and phosphate emissions; if so, the way in which this will be administered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13520/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department of Housing, Planning, Local Government and Heritage is the competent authority for the Nitrates Regulations (S.I. 605 of 2017 as amended). This regulation obliges farmers to keep within the limits set out of 170 kgs of Nitrogen from livestock manure per hectare (or 250 kgs/ N/ha for those who hold a Nitrates Derogation.)

Measures farmers can take to reduce nitrogen and phosphorus on their holding include exporting of livestock manure, renting of additional land or the movement of stock. Where livestock manure is exported off the holding and the correct records are submitted to DAFM within the time period allowed, credit is given for that movement. This includes manure sent to an AD facility.

Similarly, where the livestock manure is processed on the holding through an AD facility, it is also recorded and counted for compliance with the limits of the Nitrates regulations.

### **Forestry Sector**

1046. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the average length of time it takes to approve an afforestation application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13547/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Forestry will play an important role in meeting our environmental objectives under the Climate Action Plan and on 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 while other forestry licence types will continue to issue, afforestation will be the priority.

My Department continues to receive and issue forestry licences daily. To 5th March, the area covered by issued afforestation licences so far this year was 903ha. 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, 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, and 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.

Decisions that issued for afforestation licences in the last 12 months (March 2020 to February, 2021) were in the system for an average time of nine months. Some licences have issued in much shorter timeframe where they are easier to assess from an environmental point of view and every week there are applicants who receive licences on which applications were made only in the previous two months. However I accept that there are also those that are too long in the system and we are not meeting our output targets.

The MacKinnon report which is now being implemented through our recently announced Project Woodland has made some key recommendations on this. One of the main targets will be to bring down the average timeframe from nine months. One of the working groups implementing Project Woodland will be tasked with setting new milestones and targets for output.

We have now set ourselves a target of issuing 4,500 forestry licences in 2021, which includes afforestation, roads and felling. A new structure, under Project Woodland, is being introduced to ensure that the current backlog is addressed and that a new impetus is brought to woodland creation in Ireland. This Project will involve a review and refresh of our processes

and procedures and will include outside stakeholder participation to bring an independent perspective. It will be a task-driven process, with clear deliverable and milestones, and I anticipate that we will reach our 4,500 target this year.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate my commitment to supporting afforestation and to encourage farmers to look at tree planting as a complementary income stream to a productive farming enterprise.

### **Forestry Sector**

1047. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the total expense of the additional ecologists recruited by his Department had been compared in terms of value for money to the costed woodland environmental planning grant proposal submitted to his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13548/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The introduction of a new requirement for an Environmental report supported by a Planning grant is one of the recommendations in the Mackinnon report. The implementation report by Jo O'Hara, accepted by me, will now be advanced under Project Woodland.

This, however, is a completely separate issue to the funding of ecologists which are an integral part of the licence approval process.

Therefore, there has been no comparison made between the amount of money spent on ecologists and any proposal for planning grants, nor would it be appropriate to do so. Any Natura Impact Statements prepared by the sector, while providing a time saving to the Department, would still require to be examined by Department ecologists and the Department ecologists would be required to prepare an Appropriate Assessment Determination for any site where Appropriate Assessment is required.

### **Beef Industry**

1048. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the plans in BEAM 2019 for farmers who do not reach 5% stocking rate reduction; if farmers can obtain a pro-rata payment rate at a reduced rate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13549/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The objective of the Beef Exceptional Aid Measure (BEAM) was to provide temporary exceptional adjustment aid to farmers in the beef sector in Ireland subject to the conditions set out in EU Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/1132.

BEAM participants gave a commitment to reduce the production of bovine livestock manure nitrogen on the holding by 5% for the period 1st July 2020 to 30th June 2021 as compared with the period 1st July 2018 to 30th June 2019 as recorded on the Department's AIM system. Article 1 (3) of Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/1132 clearly sets out that measures taken by Ireland shall be aimed at reducing production or restructuring the sector.

BEAM was funded by a combination of Exchequer support and EU aid with the European Commission providing €50 million.

There is provision in the terms and conditions for those who come close to meeting the 5%

reduction. Participants who fail to reach at least a 4% reduction will see their BEAM payment recouped in full. There will be a partial recoupment of payments where a reduction of between 4% and 5% is achieved as set out below.

- Reduction less than 4% = 100% recoupment
- Reduction of 4% or more but less than 4.4% = 80% recoupment
- Reduction of 4.4% or more but less than 4.6% = 60% recoupment
- Reduction of 4.6% or more but less than 4.8% = 40% recoupment
- Reduction of 4.8% or more but less than 5% = 20% recoupment

In light of the difficulties some farmers are experiencing in meeting this reduction arising from COVID-19 Government Public Health restrictions, I sought approval from the EU Commission to bring in an alternative reference period for those who require it. My Department will be offering farmers the opportunity to select a later reduction year under BEAM if they were finding it difficult to deliver the 5% bovine manure nitrogen reduction in the period 1st July 2020 to 30th June 2021.

The alternative will be the calendar year 2021 for those who choose it. My Department will soon be in contact with participants giving them the opportunity to opt for this later 12 month period if they wish.

### **Beef Industry**

1049. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a method (details supplied) for calculating the organic output stocking rate can be used for the 2019 BEAM scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [13550/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The objective of the Beef Exceptional Aid Measure (BEAM) was to provide temporary exceptional adjustment aid to farmers in the beef sector in Ireland subject to the conditions set out in EU Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/1132.

BEAM participants gave a commitment to reduce the production of bovine livestock manure nitrogen on the holding by 5% for the period 1st July 2020 to 30th June 2021 as compared with the period 1st July 2018 to 30th June 2019 as recorded on the Department's AIM system. Article 1 (3) of Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2019/1132 clearly sets out that measures taken by Ireland shall be aimed at reducing production or restructuring the sector.

The annual nutrient excretion rates for bovines within BEAM are based on the Nitrates Regulations (S.I. No. 605/2017) and table 6 within it. Cattle (0-1 year old) are calculated as producing 24kg of Nitrogen per year. There is no provision within the Nitrates Regulations to exclude bovines less than six months of age.

### **Teagasc Activities**

1050. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the 20 new education officers being recruited by Teagasc will be new recruits or existing employees of Teagasc being moved to these roles. [13552/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I can confirm that the 20 posts represent new fixed term teaching positions over and above the existing staff complement approved for Teagasc.

I understand that Teagasc have panels in place from which they intend to make appointments. In some circumstances, existing contract staff whose contracts are coming to an end can apply for the positions, which have a duration of two years.

The appointment process for these positions is exclusively an operational matter for Teagasc.

### **Departmental Advertising**

1051. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount spent across his Department on advertising in relation to Covid-19 by month and by media outlet (details supplied) from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021. [13554/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department has not incurred expenditure on advertising in relation to COVID-19 during the period 1st March 2020 to 1st March 2021.

### **Community Enhancement Programme**

1052. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the application by Gortnahoe, County Tipperary for the community enhancement programme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12508/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** The Community Enhancement Programme provides small capital grants to community organisations to enhance facilities in disadvantaged areas.

Under the programme, funding is allocated to each local authority area and administered by the Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) in each area.

The 2021 Community Enhancement Programme has not yet been launched and will be announced in due course. It is hoped to provide details to LCDCs in early Q2, 2021 and I recommend that groups engage with their LCDC so they are aware of this and any other grants that are available.

In 2020 the programme had two rounds of funding totalling €7m and over 3,000 projects have been approved for funding. Among the projects are childcare groups and playgrounds, recreational groups, community gardens and premises, sports grounds and initiatives that support the elderly.

In reference to the Deputy's question regarding Gortnahoe only two groups in that area applied for funding in 2020. Both of these, the Patricks Gate Residents Association Gortnahoe and Gortnahoe Social & Amenity Association, were approved for funding.

Details of the projects approved for funding during 2020 are available on the Gov.ie website at <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/1e973a-community-enhancement-programme-projects/>.

### **Departmental Schemes**

1053. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the grants and funding available from the community section of her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12584/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** My Department has been allocated €341 million in the 2021 Revised Estimates, this ensures that we are in a position to further assist communities seeking funding and other supports for important local activities and projects. The Department of Rural and Community Development community grants and funding programmes include:

- The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme, or SICAP, is our country's primary social inclusion intervention. The current programme began on 1 January 2018 and will run until the end of 2022. SICAP aims to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion and equality. It does this through Programme Implementers, agencies and companies, who work with the most disadvantaged and the hardest to reach in communities. It is a national programme delivered with funding of €190 million over a five-year period from 2018 to 2022. SICAP is overseen by the Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) in each local authority area. Each LCDC agrees annual targets for its area based on local needs. My Department has engaged Pobal to work on its behalf to manage and oversee the reporting of SICAP nationally. SICAP supports a range of groups in society which are disadvantaged and marginalized.

- The Community Services Programme (CSP) currently supports 420 community organisations to provide local social, economic and environmental services through a social enterprise model. CSP funding is provided as a contribution towards the cost of employing staff in these organisations. It meets local service gaps and provides services and facilities that would not be available otherwise. Some €49million is available to support community organisations under the programme in 2021.

- The €4.5 million Community Enhancement Programme aims to streamline funding to communities in need. The programme is administered by Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) in each Local Authority area. Its mission is to provide funding to improve facilities available to communities. The funding is allocated to each Local Authority area by a methodology that reflects deprivation levels in each area. This uses the Pobal-Hasse deprivation index.

- €6.5 million is provided by my Department towards the regeneration of Dublin's North East Inner City (NEIC) to support the implementation of the Mulvey Report "Creating a Brighter Future" and the NEIC Strategic Plan 2020-2022.

- Community and Voluntary Pillar funding (€565,000): My Department also provides annual funding to members of the Community and Voluntary Pillar to support costs, not funded from any other sources, directly related to the organisations' contribution to policy-making.

- My Department's Scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNO) provides multi-annual funding towards core costs of national, community and voluntary organisations that demonstrate good governance and deliver services and supports that have a focus on one or more of the following: addressing poverty, social exclusion and promoting equality. The current scheme commenced on 1 July 2019 and will cease on 30 June 2022. The application process for the current scheme is now closed.

- My Department has responsibility for administration of the Dormant Accounts Fund, including approving the measures to be funded from the Fund which are delivered across a range of Government departments.

- The Seniors Alert Scheme encourages community support for vulnerable older people in our communities, through the provision of personal monitored alarms to enable them to live securely in their homes with confidence, independence and peace of mind. Funding is available under the scheme towards the purchase by a registered community-based organisation of a personal alarm or pendant and is administered on the Department's behalf by Pobal.

- Up to €75,700 is provided annually by my Department in respect of each Public Participation Network (PPN).

- My Department provides funding to supplement investment by local authorities in their library services. Funding is provided, for example, as a contribution towards the cost of developing library buildings, technological capacity and resources, book-stock and other areas of activity that enhance local library services. Responsibility for the delivery of public library services is generally a matter for each local authority in its capacity as a library authority under the Local Government Act 2001.

- My Department makes an annual payment to Local Authorities towards the cost of additional staff to support the community function in local authorities. It is expected that these posts will continue to support the Local Community Development Committee arrangements and the implementation of Local Economic and Community Plans in particular.

An additional €10million has been allocated to the Stability Fund as part of the revised Resilience and Recovery plan announced in February by the Taoiseach. Further details on how relevant organisations can apply for this funding will be available shortly. 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.

- The €5.5m CLÁR programme provides funding for small-scale infrastructural projects in rural areas. While not delivered by the Community Division, CLÁR aims to support sustainable development of designated areas which have experienced significant levels of depopulation. The funding works in conjunction with local funding and on the basis of locally identified priorities. The scheme is delivered mainly by local authorities in consultation with groups in local communities, with applications for some measures submitted directly to the Department.

- Further details relating to eligibility criteria and to making applications for funding are available on *gov.ie*.

### **Back to Education Allowance**

1054. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under her aegis in 2019; the cost in terms of wages and allowances; and the estimated numerical capacity of State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis. [12961/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The below table outlines the number of students who undertook work experience or internships with State and semi-State agencies under this Department's remit in 2019, the cost in terms of wages and allowances of same and the estimated numerical capacity of State and semi-State agencies to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis:

Agency	Number of students who undertook work experience or internships in 2019	Cost in terms of wages and allowances	Estimated numerical capacity of agency to provide work experience and internships on an annual basis.
Charities Regulator	0	0	0
Water Safety Ireland	0	0	0
Western Development Commission	0	0	The WDC is currently reviewing the scope to provide work experience and internships, and is examining any applicable compliance issues arising.
Pobal	Nil	Nil	5

### LEADER Programmes

1055. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the level of demand for grant aid applications received under the LEADER food initiative for artisan, micro and small-food enterprises to date funded under the Rural Development Programme regulation number 1305/2013; the funding allocated for this initiative; the draw down of funding to date; and if applications are still being accepted. [13141/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** €15 million is allocated to the LEADER Food Initiative to support the further development of food and beverage businesses throughout rural Ireland.

The scheme is managed by my Department with funding from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. It is delivered at local level through Local Action Groups (LAGs), using the LEADER methodology. Projects are jointly approved by my Department and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Since its launch almost three years ago, a total of 109 projects with a combined grant value of over €6.72 million have been approved for funding under the LEADER Food Initiative. In addition, up to €1.68 million is available for the administration costs of the LAGs.

A further 13 applications, with a grant value of over €0.8 million are at earlier stages of the approvals process.

Project payments are drawn down as approved works are completed and claims for payment are submitted by the project promoters. To date, my Department has approved payment claims and associated administration costs totaling €2.36 million in respect of these projects. Final claims for payment under the initiative must be submitted to my Department no later than 30 June 2024.

Applications for financial support under the Food Initiative are still being accepted by the LAGs.

In December 2020, I announced details of a Transitional LEADER Programme which will come into effect from 1 April 2021 and run to the end of 2022. As part of this announcement, I also approved an increase in the rate of aid for private enterprises and commercial community projects, from a maximum of 50% to a maximum of 75%. LEADER Food Initiative projects approved on or after the 1st April 2021, which satisfy the conditions, can also be considered for the increased rate of aid by the LAG.

With almost €10 million of the total LEADER Food Initiative allocation having now been committed, I am confident that the remaining funding will be allocated between now and the end of the Transitional Programme period.

## **Departmental Schemes**

1056. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if specific funding schemes will be introduced to support community and voluntary organisations that cannot fundraise and have no source of income at present; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [13334/21]

**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. Along with other broader Government initiatives, my Department has introduced a suite of programmes to support community and voluntary organisations weather the impact of COVID-19.

In 2020, a €50 million support package for the Community and Voluntary Sector, Charities and Social Enterprises was launched by Government and administered by my Department. This funding was made available from the Dormant Accounts Fund and consisted of the COVID-19 Stability Fund and the Innovate Together Fund.

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.

In December, my Department launched a €1.7m COVID-19 Emergency Fund, which community and voluntary groups could apply for through their local authorities. This follows on from a previous €2.5m round of this fund which was focussed on groups participating in the Government's "Community Call" initiative. Successful organisations will be announced shortly.

The Community Enhancement Programme (CEP) provides funding for capital grants towards enhancing facilities available to communities. The funding is allocated to local authorities and administered by Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs). Further details on the 2021 scheme will be announced in Q2 2021.

My Department currently supports 420 community organisations under the Community Services Programme (CSP) to provide local services through a social enterprise model. In response to the difficulties faced by organisations due to COVID-19, my Department developed a €4.75M Support Fund which assists all CSP supported organisations to continue to retain their CSP supported employees on their payroll and also provides assistance for the Employers PRSI contribution during this crisis period and until April 2021. My Department and Pobal, who administer the programme on behalf of my Department, are continuing to monitor the situation closely in light of the current COVID-19 restrictions and the ongoing costs being incurred by organisations

In respect of the Department's other programmes, funding commitments are being maintained, and though delays may be experienced in delivery for a period of time it is expected that all projects and initiatives will continue when it is safe to do so.

I would encourage organisations to continue to engage with their Local Authority and Local Development Company so that they are aware of funding opportunities as they become available .

## **Departmental Advertising**

10 March 2021

1057. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the amount spent across her Department on advertising in relation to Covid-19 by month and by media outlet (details supplied) from 1 March 2020 to 1 March 2021. [13565/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department's total expenditure on advertising in relation to COVID-19 for the period requested was €1,845. This related to message development for advertising purposes but it was not directly used in any media campaign.