

## 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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### Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if low interest loans will be made available through SBCI and Microfinance Ireland directly to the tourism and hospitality sector to assist them with reinvestment as part of a Covid-19 recovery strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21034/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** My Department has introduced a range of business supports in response to the COVID-19 pandemic including loan guarantee facilities for businesses of different sizes.

The COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme makes up to €2 billion in lending available to businesses that have been negatively impacted by the pandemic. As a result of the high level of the State guarantee, loans are being provided at interest rates lower than the current market rate for similar loans. Interest rates can vary across lenders and also vary depending on the size and term of the loan. The latest data available in respect of interest rates charged on drawn loans shows that 96% of loans drawn under the scheme have been provided at interest rates of between 2.5% and 2.99%. These are significantly reduced rates on commercial loans rates of the same term and size.

While these loans are predominantly being used for working capital purposes (58%), they are also being used for reinvestment purposes such as purchase of equipment and premises fit-out (26%). To date (8 April), €36m of lending under the scheme has been to businesses in accommodation and food services.

Loans available under the COVID-19 Working Capital Scheme range from €25,000 to €1.5 million and are for terms of up to three years. Loans are offered at favourable terms, including a maximum interest rate of 4% with no security on loans of up to €500,000.

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. Subsidised rates of interest have been applied in respect of the COVID-19 Business Loan and Brexit Business Loan with an interest rate of 4.5% available to all micro-enterprises where the application is made through the Local Enterprise Network or referred by a bank or Local Development Committees. The new rate for direct applications to MFI is reduced to 5.5%.

In July of 2020, the Future Growth Loan Scheme was expanded by €500m. This scheme offers state guaranteed loans to businesses seeking to make long-term investments. It has seen strong uptake since its expansion and this is an indication that businesses are planning and

making investment for a post-COVID-19 environment. As of the most recent quarterly report (to end December 2020), businesses in the accommodation and food service sector account for approximately €21.68m of the lending drawn under the scheme.

I would strongly encourage businesses to avail of the low-cost lending facilities provided under the COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme as they look towards reopening. This scheme is available until 31 December 2021 and supports both investment and liquidity needs for businesses affected by the outbreak of COVID-19 in Ireland and is available through a range of lenders including commercial banks, certain credit unions and non-bank lenders.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

2. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of the return of click and collect options/for non-essential retail services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20867/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** I understand that this is an incredibly difficult time for businesses and their customers across the country and would like to thank them for their continued support of the national effort through this unprecedented public health crisis.

Under Level 5, in line with public health guidelines, only essential retail outlets will remain open and the current temporary restrictions in Level 5 will stay in place until at least 4 May 2021. Further information can be found on *gov.ie*.

The decision to move to full scale Level 5 was not taken lightly and all factors were considered.

S.I. No. 168 of 2021 Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) 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/>.

Level 5 does not restrict people from purchasing any product, it does however restrict people from physically going into non-essential stores. This is to stop people making unnecessary journeys, congregating and browsing for non-essential goods, to limit the spread of the virus.

Under the current temporary restrictions while click and collect of non-essential retail items is no longer permitted, click or phone and delivery can continue.

Under consideration from 4th May, subject to prevailing public health situation, is the phased return of non-essential retail commencing with click and collect and outdoor retail, for example: garden centres/nurseries.

COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 - The Path Ahead which can be found on <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-living-with-covid-19/>, sets out the approach to the next phase, which is subject to ongoing review and taking into account the evolving epidemiological situation.

All decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions are informed by the public health advice at the time.

As Chair of the Retail Forum, I meet regularly with Retail Forum members and representatives from the retail grocery and distribution sector to discuss and assess adherence to the public health restrictions.

The Government has introduced a wide range of supports to help businesses impacted by the COVID-19 crisis and they can be found on the Department's website <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>

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

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

3. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his views on classifying shops that exclusively sell underwear as essential retail; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20868/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** I understand this is an incredibly difficult time for businesses and their customers across the country and I would like to thank them for their continued support of the national effort through this unprecedented public health crisis.

Under Level 5, in line with public health guidelines, only essential retail outlets will remain open and the current temporary restrictions in Level 5 will stay in place until at least 4 May 2021. Further information can be found on *gov.ie*.

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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.

Level 5 does not restrict people from purchasing any product, it does however restrict people from physically going into non-essential stores. This is to stop people making unnecessary journeys, congregating and browsing for non-essential goods, to limit the spread of the virus.

Under the current temporary restrictions while click and collect of non-essential retail items is no longer permitted, click or phone and delivery can continue.

Under consideration from 4 May, subject to prevailing public health situation, is the phased return of non-essential retail commencing with click and collect and outdoor retail, for example: garden centres/nurseries.

Retailers can and have made arrangements, on compassionate grounds, for individual customers to urgently purchase a non-essential item in store. This is only in exceptional circumstances where it is not possible to plan ahead and avail of remote ordering services such as in emergencies, e.g., admission to hospital.

We are asking retailers to exercise their best judgement and common sense on a case by case basis, to ensure those requiring urgent access to a non-essential item are accommodated.

COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 - The Path Ahead which can be found on <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-living-with-covid-19/>, sets out the approach to the next phase, which is subject to ongoing review and taking into account the evolving epidemiological situation.

All decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions are informed by the public health advice at the time.

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

### **Enterprise Support Services**

4. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of the establishment of a taskforce for the Shannon estuary including north County Kerry as committed to in the Programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20884/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I understand the importance of this Programme for Government commitment for the Shannon Estuary and surrounding area. Terms of Reference for the Taskforce are being finalised and I hope to make an announcement shortly.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

5. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if a service (details supplied) is considered an essential service under level 5 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20928/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** As you are aware, following the advice of NPHE, the Government made the decision to move the entire country to Level 5 of the Framework for Living with COVID-19 (COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead) and for essential retail and services (including childcare) to remain open.

This has been followed by the recent Government announcement of a phased easing of public health restrictions that commenced on 12th April. Further details of these phases can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/81029-government-announces-phased-easing-of-public-health-restrictions/>.

However, all non-essential services must stay closed for now. This is to help reduce the number of people moving about as the variant of the virus, B-117, that we are dealing with now is more transmissible and it is significantly more dangerous. A list of essential services can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/>.

Businesses should carefully review the essential services list and determine whether they can operate or not under the current restrictions.

The full list of essential services and activities currently permitted is set out in S.I. No. 168 of 2021, as amended, and does not include a general category of outdoor work.

The current public health measures will remain in place until 4th May. Government will

meet in advance of that date to review the level of restrictions.

Government decisions are not taken lightly, and I am acutely conscious of the impact they have on businesses. That is why the Government has worked to support businesses through this difficult time with a comprehensive range of measures for firms of all sizes. Details of the wide range of COVID-19 schemes and measures for businesses are available on my Department's website at <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

## Competition and Consumer Protection Commission

**6. Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment further to Parliamentary Question No. 141 of 24 March 2021, the supports provided by his Department or bodies under the aegis of his Department to Irish persons who purchased property as part of the French leaseback property scandal, particularly in view of the fact that these persons have been waiting for several years for the outcome of the French Directorate General for Competition Policy, Consumer Affairs and Fraud Control investigation and many of them are facing serious financial difficulties and home repossessions as a result of the alleged fraud; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21006/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** As outlined in relation to PQ No. 13952/21 on French leaseback properties, one of the primary functions of the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission ('CCPC') is to enforce consumer protection law in Ireland. For cross border consumer protection issues, the CCPC is part of the European Consumer Protection Co-operation (CPC) Network, which is comprised of national authorities responsible for enforcing EU consumer protection laws. This network protects consumers when conducting transactions across national borders, and allows consumer protection agencies to co-operate to resolve particular consumer issues. The CPC Network is central to addressing this matter, which involved the purchase by consumers of properties in France. These properties were developed, marketed, sold and managed by French traders under a French 'Residence de Tourisme' scheme devised by the French Government to provide tourist accommodation in France. Under the European CPC network, the appropriate authorities to conduct an investigation in relation to this matter are the French consumer protection authorities – Direction Générale de la Concurrence, de la Consommation et de la Répression des Fraudes ('DGCCRF').

When Irish persons who purchased property as part of this scheme first contacted the CCPC in 2017, they recognised the fact that the consumer protection mechanisms put in place through the CPC Network were the appropriate channel to effectively progress the matter. On this basis, the CCPC engaged with the DGCCRF with respect to the issues highlighted by Irish property purchasers. Over 2017 and 2018 the CCPC conducted and provided to the DGCCRF an initial preliminary assessment of over 150 Irish complainants and the issues raised by them. Following a request from the DGCCRF investigation service, the CCPC sought the transactional documentation of over 150 Irish property purchasers. This transactional documentation was collated by the CCPC and provided to the DGCCRF in 2019. In January 2020, the CCPC was able to advise complainants that the DGCCRF had commenced a criminal investigation. In April 2020, the CCPC was advised that due to COVID-19 the DGCCRF investigation had been disrupted and that this had delayed progress on the matter. The CCPC has dedicated a considerable amount of resources in order to progress this work in a timely fashion, in order to support complainants and ensure that all pertinent information was provided to DGCCRF.

The CCPC has provided and continues to provide significant time and resources to this matter and to supporting the DGCCRF investigation. They receive regular contact from complain-

ants in relation to the matter and the CCPC has endeavoured to provide whatever information and support that is within their remit. In addition, throughout the period of engagement with the DGCCRF, whenever issues have been raised by Irish property purchasers, the CCPC has passed these on to DGCCRF and taken whatever additional steps requested by DGCCRF.

As outlined in the response to PQ No. 13952/21, in order to protect the integrity of the investigation and comply with relevant French criminal procedural codes, DGCCRF requested that the CCPC does not comment or communicate on the investigation other than the updates which have been provided. The CCPC has strictly adhered to this request. However, CCPC has continued to engage with them and to seek updates on progress. Should DGCCRF provide any update that can be passed on to complainants, the CCPC will action that as quickly as possible and ensure that all of the complainants are informed. The CCPC's priority in relation to this matter is to continue to support the DGCCRF investigation and to ensure that they comply with the legal procedural requirements of the French criminal investigation process.

### **Redundancy Payments**

7. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his plans to review redundancy legislation in relation to correspondence (details supplied). [21025/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** I fully appreciate the difficult circumstances that employees are facing. The purpose of the emergency measure which relates to redundancy entitlements following temporary periods of lay-off and short-time work due to Covid-19 was to mitigate the serious risks to businesses and jobs and to ensure employees have a continued link to their employment. The measure was brought into effect from 13th March 2020 and given the ongoing serious risks to businesses and jobs, the Government decided to extend the provision to 30th June 2021.

The decision to extend these provisions further has been a difficult one and the Government acknowledges that it will come as a disappointment for many employees who want certainty in relation to their redundancy entitlements. However, due to the ongoing public health situation and restrictions which remain in place, serious risks to businesses and jobs remain. If the Government did not extend the emergency provision further employers will be subject to significant redundancy claims which will damage the ability of a business to recover and result in insolvency situations which will only exacerbate the risk of further permanent job losses.

All other redundancy provisions remain unchanged and in force. If an employer is going to make an employee redundant, protections such as notice periods for redundancy and the payment of a redundancy lump-sum to the affected employee still apply and the existing suite of employment rights legislation remains in place.

Finally, the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) is the organisation mandated to secure compliance with employment rights legislation. The Customer Service section of the WRC operates a telephone helpline at 1890 808090 and one of their functions is to assist employees in relation to their concerns or complaints regarding their employment rights. They can also be contacted via their website.

### **Transport Policy**

8. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employ-

ment the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21049/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Notwithstanding the current public health advice for staff to continue to work from home at this time, my Department and its Offices, has a number of initiatives to promote staff wellbeing and our internal Green agenda, both areas which can involve using active travel as part of any commute to and from work for staff, depending on their circumstances.

In Spring 2020, the Department launched its Wellbeing Framework for staff which involves a series of measures spanning physical fitness, mental fitness, diet and nutrition and social connectivity. Clearly due to COVID-19 restrictions, implementation of the ambition in this Framework had to be pivoted to be delivered in an almost fully remote working environment providing a range of information through the internal intranet, Webinars including guest speakers that have focused on the importance of physical activity, including, where possible, incorporating that as part of staff's daily routine including any commute to/from the office.

In June last year as part of our "Green Week" staff were encouraged to do a collective "Tour d'Irlande" with the distances cycled by staff, be it as part of their commute as an essential worker, or as part of their own physical activity on a daily basis, combined cumulatively to demonstrate the reduction of the staff's carbon footprint.

The Department is also a participant in the Government's "Bike to Work" scheme since its introduction in 2009 which encourages staff to cycle to work. There is no cost incurred to the Department's vote in participating in this scheme and the bicycles and any related equipment which qualify under the Scheme are paid for by staff themselves by way of salary sacrifice spread over a single year.

The Department is also in the process of upgrading the basement area of its headquarters in Kildare Street to provide additional space for bicycles. We have also enhanced the shower facilities and will be doing more to upgrade facilities across our buildings, for staff who wish to walk, run or cycle to/from the office as part of their daily commute.

## **National Broadband Plan**

9. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of a broadband connection for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20870/21]

**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 15 April 2021, over 204,000 premis-

es across all counties have been surveyed. In County Cork premises have been surveyed or are ongoing including in the areas Midelton, Cullen, Templebreedy, Carrigaline, Ballyfoyle, Douglas, Ballyphehane, Glasheen, Mahon, Kilpatrick, Ballydesmond, Kiskeam, Umeraboy, Knocknagree, Rineen, Cullen, Coolinarna, Millstreet, Hollymount and Caherbarnagh. Build and pre-build works are underway in Carrigaline, Fountainstown, Ballinhassig, Monkstown, Upper Rochestown and Midleton. The first fibre to the home connections have been successfully connected and are in a test and trial phase in Carrigaline, Co Cork and Cavan. I am advised that over 2,300 premises are now passed and available for connection in Counties Cork and Cavan.

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 providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of 15 April, 302 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible sites and the Department of Education for schools. BCP sites installed in Cork are Ballindangan Community Centre, Aghabullogue Community Centre, Castletownkenneigh Community Centre, Lissavard Community Centre (located 8.44 Kilometres from the premises), Whitechurch Community Centre and T.O. Park Labbamollaga. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

Clogagh and Ballycraheen National School are planned 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/>.

## **Wind Energy Generation**

10. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the benefits he envisages for north County Kerry arising from the recent off-shore wind energy project announcement in County Clare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20885/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government commits to the achievement of 5GW of offshore wind by 2030 and the development of a longer-term plan to potentially take advantage of up to 30GW of off-shore floating wind power in our deeper Atlantic waters.

These targets entail very large capital investments with the potential for a large number of long-term, high-value jobs in the installation and maintenance of wind farm assets and associated infrastructure and services. The development of offshore wind farms will offer a significant new business opportunity for large ports, for turbine assembly and deployment, and smaller

ports, for operation and maintenance services.

Additionally, in the short-to-medium term, offshore wind projects are expected to be supported via the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS). A requirement of this scheme is for supported projects to establish Community Benefit Funds prior to project operation and for specified contributions to be made to these funds. Owing to the larger scale of offshore wind developments, these contributions are similarly expected to be significantly larger than those of onshore projects.

### **National Broadband Plan**

11. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of a broadband survey at a location (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20900/21]

**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 15 April 2021, over 204,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. In County Kerry, premises have been surveyed in the areas of Muckross, Fossa, Kilcummin, Lissivigeen, Ballycasheen, Faha, Firies, Ballyhar, Curraheen, Abbeydorney, Kilflynn, Firies, Castlemaine and Ardfert. Surveys are underway in Rathmore, Knocknacopple, Mounthorgan, Kilquane Upper, Barraduff, Cloonteen, Gneevgullia, Tureenamult, Renasup, Castlegregory, Aughacasla, Camp, Knockbrack, Maum, Lougher, Inch, Annascaul, Derrygorman, Ballyglasheen, Brackluin, Ballintarmon, Drom, An Clochan, Kilshannig, Fahamore, Candeehy Breanainn, Ballyheigue, Glenderry, Ladywell, Banna, Lerrig, Ballymacandrew, Causeway, Foxfort, Ballymacaquinn, Ballincloher, Dromartin and Beenconeen. Build works have started in the areas around Tralee in Curraheen, Abbeydorney, Kilflynn, Firies, Castlemaine and Ardfert. Pre-build works in the Killarney area have also commenced.

In terms of the area referred to in the Question, I am not in a position to confirm when surveys are due to commence. Further details are available on specific areas within County Kerry through the NBI website which provides a facility for any premises within the intervention area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website [www.nbi.ie](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 15

April, 302 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible sites and the Department of Education for schools. BCP sites installed in Kerry are Gneeveguilla (Tureencahill), Railway Station Heritage Centre and Community Space, Inch Community Centre, Kielduff Community Centre and Cillín Liath. Cable Station and Chapeltown Community Centre (located 8.43 Kilometres from the premises) are installed and connected. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

Boheeshil National School, Dunloe Upper and Coars National School are installed 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/>.

### Proposed Legislation

12. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the stage the proposed geothermal energy Bill is at; the further length of time his Department plans to take in finalising the Bill; when the Bill will be produced in view of the fact that the geological survey of Ireland is fully complete; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20981/21]

**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 announced plans for developing such a framework for the sector. On 18 November 2020 my Department published two papers, available at [gov.ie](http://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.

As set out in the roadmap above and in Action 196 of the Interim Climate Actions published on 23 March, 2021 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 (Q3 2021);
- the development of a draft policy statement on geothermal energy to be published for consultation (Q4 2021);
- a final policy for Government consideration (Q2 2022); and, if approved;
- preparation of supporting legislation setting out the new regulatory framework (Q3 2022 onwards).

### Transport Policy

13. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21050/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Since March 2020 the staff of my Department have been predominantly working from home as required under Covid 19 restrictions.

My Department's Resource Action Efficiency Plan (REAP) encourages staff to consider the impact their chosen mode of travel to work and when travelling for work will have on the Department's carbon footprint.

My Department provides bike racks, lockers and shower facilities for staff who wish to walk, cycle or jog etc. when commuting to work and these facilities will be increased when we relocate to our new headquarters in 2023. As an employer, my Department also participates in the Cycle to Work Scheme which provides a tax incentive for staff to cycle to work.

The information 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.

### **National Broadband Plan**

14. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when Hands Lane, Rush, County Dublin will be provided with fibre broadband given that a number of commitments have been made to provide the area with fibre broadband going back as far as 2016. [21064/21]

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

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

Notwithstanding this, my Department has considered the matter raised and our investigations show that the area referred to in the Question should be able to access high speed broadband from their service provider. Initial checks suggest that premises in the area should be able to obtain speeds of up to 90Mbps.

Complaints about service provision are a matter for discussion 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

remains unable to obtain 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 further by my officials.

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

15. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Transport the financial support and business assistance available specifically to the corporate transport and travel sector given that most supports have been focused on the sectors involved in the tourism element of travel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21067/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** The Government has put in place a comprehensive package to help businesses and workers during the pandemic. Many firms in the travel sector have availed of various Government SME supports such as the Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS). They may also be eligible to warehouse VAT and PAYE (Employer) debts and also excess payments received by employers under the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, the balance of Income Tax for 2019 and Preliminary Tax for 2020 for self-assessed taxpayers, if applicable. In addition, the Small Business Assistance Scheme for COVID (SBASC) is providing grants to help cover some fixed costs such as rent and utilities for those firms that fall outside of the scope of CRSS and other direct sectoral grant schemes.

Furthermore, the State is also providing a special financial guarantee under a Refund Credit Note scheme for the licensed travel trade sector. This has been an important measure in protecting the cash position of travel firms - who are unquestionably stressed - allowing them to issue State-guaranteed notes to the aggregate cash value of around €19M.

I am mindful that the corporate transport and travel sector has been especially impacted by COVID 19 and Government's position on international travel due to public health considerations. The Government remains fully committed to doing everything possible to support all those affected by this terrible virus, including continuing to help businesses survive until such times as they can begin to trade again.

### **Driver Licences**

16. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Transport the systems in place to allow returning emigrants from countries with which Ireland does not have driver licence exchange agreements to drive here given the level 5 restrictions and their impact on services provided by the Road Safety Authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20882/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** When people come to Ireland with a non-exchange licence, we have no option but to require them to go through the process of obtaining an Irish licence. This is a matter of public safety. While many may have a safe driving record, we have no way of measuring this.

At present, people with a full but non-exchange licence go through the normal driver learning process but can avail of the shorter Essential Driver Training of 6 lessons instead of the usual 12, and they do not have to be a learner for the usual minimum of 6 months before taking a driving test.

The Level 5 restrictions and the impact on the services provided by the Road Safety Author-

ity (RSA) affect all learner drivers and not just returning emigrants.

The Driver Theory Test (DTT) Service was not deemed to be an essential service under Level 5 restrictions, and the service has been closed since late December 2020. 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. In addition to the increased capacity initiative, and at the request of the Department, the RSA is also working on a plan to rollout an online driver theory test service. The pilot is being evaluated and the RSA is committed to extending the service for all theory test customers during 2021.

Under the current restrictions, applicants can attend an appointment at an NDLS centre to apply for a learner permit or driving licence provided they are an essential worker involved in the provision of essential services or essential retail outlets. All applicants can apply online if they have a MyGovID verified account, which requires a Public Service Card.

Approved Driving Instructors may only continue to provide lessons to those who have a driving test appointment.

### **Electric Vehicles**

17. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport if there are grants or reliefs available to potential purchasers of electric bikes similar to that offered to purchasers of electric cars; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20906/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Deputy may be aware, tax policy is a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Finance, in the first instance. I very much welcomed the announcement of increased thresholds under the existing Cycle to Work Scheme as part of the 2020 July Stimulus package, as well as the expansion of the scheme to electric bikes. The changes to the Scheme are in line with the commitment made in the Programme for Government.

The use of e-bikes is proving to be an increasingly popular method of travel, whether for commuting or leisure purposes, and is encouraging more people to choose to cycle. Bearing this in mind, and referencing the commitment by the Government to increase funding to active travel, all potential incentives to potential purchasers of bikes and e-bikes will be taken into consideration moving forward.

The Deputy may also be aware that my Department is in the process of preparing a new Sustainable Mobility Policy following public consultation last year. This new policy framework will provide a strategic backdrop to the increased investment planned by this Government across the sustainable mobility programme, including active travel, and I look forward to the completion of this important work in 2021.

### **Greenways Provision**

18. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the development and provision of funding of the Hazelhatch greenway; if additional funding will be made available for this project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20923/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** An application for funding remains on file in relation to a section of the Grand Canal Greenway from the 12th Lock to the Hatch Pub Bridge near Hazelhatch. This section was not funded in 2019 due to funding constraints. I

understand officials in my Department are currently seeking updated information from South Dublin County Council in this regard should further funding come available later this year. It remains our hope to complete the Grand Canal Greenway in the coming years. Funding was made available to sections in Offaly and Kildare, but again funding constraints meant the entire Greenway could not be funded at that stage.

I understand the Deputy was also asking for information on a Greenway from the bridge on the Grand Canal through Hazelhatch and towards Leixlip Louisa Bridge. I understand that at present there are no plans for such a Greenway; however, when the section from the 12th lock to the Hatch Bridge is complete we will be looking at connecting to Hazelhatch itself. Plans from Hazelhatch to Leixlip Louisa Bridge would need to be developed by Kildare County Council in the first instance in conjunction with the National Transport Authority (NTA).

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

19. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Transport the reason Israel has been removed from the list of countries required to undergo mandatory hotel quarantine on arrival in Ireland; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the 3.5 million plus Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem who come under the direct control of the Israeli Government have not been given access by Israel to the Covid-19 vaccine; his views on whether that by differentiating between Israelis and Palestinians this leads to further victimisation of Palestinians; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20936/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** The Designation of states is a matter primarily for the Minister for Health, under section 38E (1) of the Health Act 1947 (inserted by section 7 of the Health (Amendment) Act 2021). It provides the Minister for Health, on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer, to specify additional states as designated states, following consultation with the Minister for Foreign Affairs and such other Ministers that are considered appropriate (Section 38E (3) of the Act refers). The Act also provides for the revocation of designation from states under Section 38E (4).

On 11th April, the Minister for Health revoked the designation of Albania, Israel, and Saint Lucia in accordance with Section 38E(4) of the Health Act 1947 based on the advice of the Acting Chief Medical Officer, and following the recommendation of the Expert Advisory Group on Travel.

The Expert Advisory Group on Travel (EAGT) was established on 1 March 2021 and was charged with developing a methodology for risk assessments to inform the categorisation of countries and consider the broader issues relating to travel. The list of countries is kept under ongoing review by the EAGT.

Foreign Policy matters are the responsibility of the Minister Foreign Affairs.

### **Search and Rescue Service Provision**

20. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the comments made by the head of the Irish Coast Guard (details supplied) with regard to the awarding of the search and rescue contract; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20950/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Transparency is a fundamental element of public procurement processes. In the interests of

ensuring transparency for all parties potentially interested in the Irish Coastguard Search and Rescue Aviation Project, my Department posts all relevant communications on the process on our dedicated webpage (Irish Coast Guard: Search and Rescue (SAR) Aviation Project) and on etenders.ie. Full details regarding the procurement process can be found at those locations. The project is an on-going confidential process which will ultimately lead to a Government decision on a successor contract award. It would not be appropriate for me to comment on, or respond to, views of interested third parties, who have offered views in various media.

I should highlight that Mr. Chris Reynolds is not currently serving as Director of the Irish Coast Guard and has not had any role in relation to this project.

### **Driver Licences**

21. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if he will extend expiry dates for initial basic training certificates of satisfactory completion for motorcyclists similar to the extensions previously provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20962/21]

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

I can confirm that the Road Safety Authority (RSA) has recently submitted a proposal to my Department for a further extension to IBT certificates. This is currently being worked on within my Department. An update is expected shortly.

### **Transport Policy**

22. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21062/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** In addition to the significant increases in funding to our Active Travel infrastructure programme, my Department also supports a number of behavioural change programmes specifically aimed at encouraging employees and third level students to choose to commute via walking or cycling. The Smarter Travel Workplaces, Smarter Travel Campus Programme, which is overseen by the NTA, is a national, voluntary, behaviour change programme that works with large employers and third level institutions to implement workplace travel plans that facilitate sustainable travel on the commute and beyond.

The Cycle to Work Scheme, which falls under the remit of my colleague, the Minister for Finance, also assists employees with purchasing a bicycle to commute to work. Given its role in promoting Active Travel, I very much welcomed the announcement of increased thresholds under the Scheme as part of the July 2020 Stimulus package. The increases are in line with the commitment made in the Programme for Government.

The issue of facilitating Active Travel both for employees and across the general public will also be considered in the context of my Department's review of Sustainable Mobility Policy which is currently ongoing. I intend that the new policy framework will provide a strategic backdrop to the increased investment planned by this Government across the sustainable mobility programme, including Active Travel, and I look forward to the completion of this important work in 2021.

## **Help-To-Buy Scheme**

23. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Finance if the timeframe for applicants to meet the conditions for the help-to-buy scheme will be extended by the number of weeks that construction was closed down; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21071/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Help to Buy (HTB) incentive is a scheme to assist first-time purchasers with obtaining the deposit they need to buy or build a new house or apartment. The scheme gives a refund on Income Tax and Deposit Interest Retention Tax (DIRT) paid in the State over the previous four years, subject to limits outlined in the legislation. Section 477C of the Taxes Consolidation Act (TCA) 1997 outlines the definitions and conditions that apply to the scheme.

In summary, the process for a first-time buyer to claim HTB involves two stages, application stage and claim stage. At the application stage, the claimant notifies Revenue of his/her intention to make a HTB claim and checks are carried out to ensure the applicant satisfies certain conditions of the scheme. Once confirmed Revenue notifies the applicant with the potential HTB refund available.

An application for HTB will remain valid until one or more of the following occurs:

- (a) if it is discovered that the individual did not satisfy a condition of HTB,
- (b) an individual's tax clearance is rescinded, or
- (c) 31 December (in the tax year in which the application is made).

In respect to point (c) above, for example where an application is made during the period 1 October to 31 December 2021, and a claim is made on foot of such an application in the period 1 January to 31 March 2022, the claim will be deemed to have been made in 2021.

With regard to the claim stage, Section 477C(3) TCA provides that a first time purchaser may make a claim for a HTB refund following the signing of a contract to purchase a home or, in the case of a self-build, following the drawdown of the first tranche of the relevant mortgage.

Revenue Tax and Duty Manual Part 15-01-46 outlines further guidance on the conditions and operation of the HTB scheme.

More generally, the future of the HTB scheme, beyond its current sunset date of 31 December 2021, is a matter that will fall to be considered in the context of Budget 2022 and the subsequent Finance Bill.

## **Tax Data**

24. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance the number of persons who have availed of capital gains tax relief on properties acquired between 7 December 2011 and 31 December 2014; the average amount of relief per person; the county or country in which the relief was granted in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20889/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** At the outset, I am assuming that the Deputy is referring to Capital Gains Tax (CGT) relief under Section 604A of the Taxes Consolidation Act, 1997.

I am advised by Revenue that the latest available data available is for the tax year 2018,

which is published on the Revenue website. Information in respect of the number of claimants and the amount of relief claimed is replicated below. The location of disposed properties is not available from tax returns information.

Range of Gain Relieved	No. of Claimants	Amount Claimed (€m)	Exchequer Cost (€m)
€1 - €20,000	202	1.0	0.3
€20,001 - €40,000	76	2.3	0.8
€40,001 - €60,000	55	2.7	0.9
€60,001 - €80,000	45	3.1	1.0
€80,001 - €100,000	30	2.7	0.9
€100,001 - €200,000	77	11	3.6
€200,001 - €500,000	69	20.8	6.9
€500,001 - €1,000,000	28	18.9	6.2
€1,000,000 +	50	279.1	92.1
Total	632	342	113

An update of the published information will be available over the next few months, when the 2019 CGT returns are fully analysed. It should be noted that the cost shown is only in respect of claims on tax returns filed and does not include any cost associated with property not yet disposed of or included in CGT returns that may become available at a later date.

### Help-To-Buy Scheme

25. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Finance the number of applications granted for the help-to-buy scheme by county in each of the years 2018 to 2020; the number of applications by county in each of the years 2018 to 2020 by dwellings which were purchased and built, respectively; and the average amount granted per application in each of the years 2018 to 2020, in tabular form. [20905/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Help To Buy (HTB) scheme is designed to assist first-time buyers with the deposit required to purchase or self-build a new house or apartment to live in as their home.

HTB has a two main stages: the application stage and the claim stage. Compliant taxpayers who complete a HTB application are provided with an application number and a summary of the maximum relief available to them under the incentive. A mortgage provider, broker, qualifying contractor or solicitor can use this summary to verify the relief available to the applicant, for the purposes of mortgage approval or drawdown, or signing a house purchase contract.

An application will progress to the claim stage where the applicant decides to purchase a property that is eligible for the scheme. Many applications may never progress to the claim stage because the applicant does not purchase a property or purchases a property not eligible for the scheme.

Claims made cannot be approved and paid until the qualifying contractor, or the solicitor acting on behalf of self-builder, has verified the claim. Claims are approved by Revenue in the vast majority of cases but at any given time there will be a number of pending claims awaiting approval.

I am advised by Revenue that annual and monthly statistics on the Help to Buy (HTB) scheme are published on its website. Both reports provide a geographical breakdown of HTB claims by county.

The following HTB claims (cumulative) were made by county in the each half-year period

2017 to 2020:

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-04-22\_pq25-22-04-2021\_en.docx">Help to Buy Scheme</a>]

\* Revenue advise me that In certain periods Leitrim, Longford and Sligo data are not included as the numbers are small.

The following table sets out the claims (cumulative) by property type (including retrospective claims). Revenue advises that a breakdown of this information by county is not readily available.

-	Total End 2020	Total End 2019	Total End 2018	Total End 2017
Type: Purchased (Retrospective Claim)	1,068	1,062	1,042	1,001
Type: Purchased (Non-Retrospective Claim)	16,486	11,994	7,223	3,387
Type: Self-Build (Retrospective Claim)	399	375	343	292
Type: Self-Build (Non-Retrospective Claim)	5,196	3,516	1,682	621

Finally, Revenue advises that the average claims (rounded to the nearest €100) for each of the years from 2018 to 2020 are as follows:

2020: €20,000

2019: €15,200

2018: €14,800

### Financial Services Regulation

26. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether the legislation which governs financial and corporate behaviour is fit for purpose; if not, the changes he plans to make; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20927/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Since 2011, the Government has enacted a broad range of primary and secondary legislation to address issues that arose prior to 2008, to provide more consumer protection and to ensure greater oversight, stability and sustainability of the Irish financial services sector.

The regulatory landscape has been utterly overhauled since the financial crisis, with:

- the Central Bank Reform Act 2010;
- the Central Bank Supervision and Enforcement Act 2013;
- the creation of the European Single Supervisory Mechanism in 2014
- the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) Act 2018.

These, among other legal and regulatory changes have significantly changed the regulation and supervision of the financial sector.

The Central Bank of Ireland is acknowledged now as being one of the most robust and challenging financial regulatory institutions in Europe.

Additionally, like a number of other countries, we are advancing national legislative change to improve culture within the financial services sector.

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

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

It is my hope that the Heads of Bill can be published in July. This, however, will be subject to the Attorney General's advice on the adequacy of the safeguards included to protect the constitutional rights at stake.

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

27. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if clarification will be provided on a matter regarding the Covid restrictions support scheme (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20929/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The objective of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) is to support all employment and maintain the link between the employer and employee insofar as is possible. The EWSS "turnover test" has been specifically designed so as to target the subsidy at otherwise viable employers whose businesses continue to be adversely impacted by COVID-19 by requiring a comparison of the firm's pre-pandemic operations with their current operations. The legislation provides that the employer must be able to demonstrate that they are operating at no more than 70% in either the turnover of the employer's business or the customer orders received by the employer in Q1 and Q2 2021 compared with the same period in 2019.

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, payments of over €2.7 billion and PRSI credit of over €450 million have been granted to 48,500 employers in respect of almost 550,000 workers.

I have been clear that there will be no cliff-edge to the EWSS and, 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.

Consideration is also 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 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.

The Covid Restrictions Support Scheme, the CRSS, is a targeted support for businesses significantly impacted by restrictions introduced by the Government under the public health regulations to combat the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Small Business Assistance Scheme for Covid (SBASC) gives grants to businesses who are not eligible for the CRSS. This scheme is under the remit of An Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Deputy

Varadkar. Specific queries in relation to that scheme should be direct to that Department.

For those businesses that may need additional support during this period, 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 - the Credit Guarantee Scheme, the SBCI Working Capital Scheme, Sustaining Enterprise Fund, and the Covid-19 Business Loans Scheme. Comprehensive information on the supports available can be located at - <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

### Defective Building Materials

28. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if the prices of properties that have undergone full remediation under the financial assistance scheme for the remediation of damaged dwellings due to defective concrete blocks have recovered to reflect remediation; and if his attention has been drawn to any policy retail banks have towards providing mortgages for properties that have undergone full remediation under the scheme. [21012/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** My colleague the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage is responsible for the defective concrete blocks remediation financial assistance scheme and his Department will be best place to advise on the progress of the scheme including the number of properties which have undergone full remediation.

The mortgage lending policies of retail banks is a business and commercial and operation matter for each individual lender and I am not aware of, nor have I any role in, any policy retail banks may have towards providing mortgages for properties that have undergone full remediation under the defective concrete block financial assistance scheme.

### Tax Reliefs

29. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the reason the stay and spend relief is only applicable from October 2020 to April 2021 and not from July 2020 as was previously indicated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21042/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I refer the Deputy to the statement I made during the Dáil second stage debate of the Financial Provisions (Covid-19) (No. 2) Bill 2020 on 29 July 2020, and in particular the following extract:

“It [the Stay and Spend scheme] will run from 1 October 2020 to 30 April 2021”

In relation to the rationale for the 1 October start date, I advised the House that:

“This will incentivise taxpayers to support registered or accredited providers of accommodation, food or both during the off-season, thus providing support to a particularly vulnerable sector that continues to be constrained by public health limitations.”

The purpose of the scheme was to support demand in the hospitality sector at a time when, notwithstanding the public health situation, demand might be normally be expected to be lower than throughout the summer months.

The scheme was legislated for at a time when there appeared to be a steady downward trend in infection rates and there was an expectation that the re-opening of the economy could be sustained uninterrupted. Unfortunately, this has not been the case and, with the exception of

some short periods, public health restrictions have had the effect of impeding the operation of the incentive as originally envisaged.

I am conscious of the exceptional difficulties that remain to be faced by the hospitality sector and in this regard I would note that besides the Stay and Spend scheme, other measures which are of significance are in place to support businesses generally, including the hospitality sector. These include the temporary reduction in the VAT rate from 13.5% to 9% with effect from 1 November 2020, the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme, the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme and the Debt Warehousing Scheme.

## Transport Policy

30. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Finance the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21051/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Cycle to Work scheme is an action of my Department and Revenue that encourages people to cycle to and from work. Section 118(5G) of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (TCA 1997) provides for this scheme. This scheme provides an exemption from benefit-in-kind where an employer purchases a bicycle and associated safety equipment for an employee. Under section 118B TCA 1997, an employer and employee may also enter into a salary sacrifice arrangement under which the employee agrees to sacrifice part of his or her salary, in exchange for a bicycle and related safety equipment. Where a bicycle or safety equipment is purchased under the Cycle to Work scheme or through a salary sacrifice arrangement, certain conditions must be met. Further guidance regarding the Cycle to Work scheme and salary sacrifice arrangements can be found on Revenue's website. The Cycle to Work scheme is available to all staff in my Department and is centrally administered for my Department by HR Shared Services.

My Department has a number of facilities to aid staff who actively travel to work. There are dedicated secure bicycle parking facilities across a number of locations and the installation of a dedicated bicycle repair station is currently in progress. My Department also has a dedicated drying room, where staff can dry wet gear. There are a number of shower cubicles in all buildings occupied by my Department, which staff can utilise as required and an increase in the capacity of shower cubicles is currently in progress.

Active travel is not an issue for a number of the 17 bodies under the aegis of my Department, namely the Credit Union Advisory Committee, the Credit Union Restructuring Board, the Disabled Drivers Medical Board of Appeal, the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation and the Irish Financial Services Appeals Tribunal.

The Credit Union Advisory Committee is not a State agency, rather it is a committee set up to advise the Minister for Finance on credit union issues. The Credit Union Restructuring Board was operationally wound down in 2017, having concluded its restructuring work and is awaiting formal dissolution. The Disabled Drivers Medical Board of Appeal, the Irish Bank Resolution Corporation and the Irish Financial Services Appeals Tribunal do not have employees.

The remaining bodies under my Department's remit have provided the following on how they encourage and facilitate their employees to use active travel to commute to work:

Before moving to its headquarters in North Wall Quay (NWQ), the Central Bank of Ireland published a Smarter Travel Action Plan on its intranet site, aimed at helping staff with the move to the NWQ campus and encouraging a shift to sustainable travel modes such as walking,

cycling and public transport. The welcome pack to the new building, shared in advance of the move, highlighted all public transport options in the near vicinity and estimated times to walk from public transport stations and stops. The Bank is also considering a post-pandemic travel survey for all staff. The Central Bank provides secure bicycle spaces, showers, changing rooms and drying rooms across its city centre campus to support/encourage staff to walk, run and cycle to work. These end of journey facilities, which include a bike maintenance station provide staff with the means to commute to work in a comfortable manner. Similar facilities are provided at the Bank's premises in Sandyford. In addition to the Bank's dedicated bicycle parking facilities, a Dublin Bike park is located close to the NWQ premises. The Bank's Facilities Management team meets regularly with a staff cycling liaison group to discuss any issues, and ensure provision of safe, secure and efficient facilities. The Bank also advertises the Cycle to Work scheme for staff twice per year. In conjunction with other organisations in the area and independently, the Bank has been in regular communication with the National Transport Authority to review transport options in the NWQ district.

The Investor Compensation Company shares a premises with the Central Bank and all staff are seconded from the Bank. As such, any facilities provided by the Bank or measures taken by the Bank to encourage active travel, as set out above, also apply to the Investor Compensation Company.

Staff in the Credit Review Office are seconded from Enterprise Ireland. Enterprise Ireland (EI) is a body under the aegis of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and as such EI is responsible for any measures taken to encourage and facilitate staff in the Credit Review Office to use active travel to commute to work.

The Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General has a large number of bicycle parking facilities and can easily facilitate those who bike to work. The Office also has changing rooms and showers at its premises, to facilitate those who use active travel to commute to work.

The Irish Fiscal Advisory Council includes information on the Cycle to Work scheme in its employee handbook/HR manual. A large number of employees have availed of this scheme since beginning their employment with the Council.

The Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman encourages employees to commute to work using active travel by promoting the Cycle to Work scheme and making facilities available for staff who cycle to work. On the implementation of its Return to Work plan, it will encourage active travel, both in the context of overall employee wellbeing and the potential impact on passenger numbers on public transport.

The National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA), National Asset Management Agency (NAMA), Home Building Finance Ireland (HBFI) and the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) are State Boards under my Department's remit. The NTMA provides business, facilities and support services to NAMA, HBFI and the SBCI, and operates the Cycle to Work Scheme to encourage employees to use active travel to commute to work. The NTMA's Treasury Dock building has various facilities to encourage walkers, runners and cyclists such as bicycle parking spaces, changing rooms and drying rooms for wet gear.

The Office of the Revenue Commissioners has in place an active employee wellbeing framework that includes encouragement to employees to remain active to support their wellbeing. Revenue supports cycling to work via the government Cycle to Work scheme. Having regard to the current Covid-19 health restrictions, some 80% of Revenue staff are working from home. Those staff who are attending the workplace are advised to avoid the use of public transport and to walk or cycle to work where possible.

The Tax Appeals Commission has been actively promoting the Cycle to Work scheme for its staff and secure bicycle racks are available to meet the needs of staff.

## State Pensions

31. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance if there is specific evidence or analysis conducted by his Department that confirms that an increase in the State pension age would lead to significant long-term cost savings for the Exchequer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21075/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** In March 2021, the Department of Finance made a submission to the Commission on Pensions, which is available on the Department's website.[1] The analysis set out in the document attempts inter alia to quantify the likely budgetary costs of population ageing in order to inform the appropriate policy response. It builds on work undertaken by the Department of Finance in conjunction with other Finance Ministries in the European Union, together with the European Commission, through the EU Ageing Working Group.

While Ireland's demographic structure is relatively favourable at present, shifting demographics in the coming decades will result in a slower pace of economic expansion and increased expenditure pressures putting significant pressure on the public finances. Recent projections from Eurostat point to Ireland having one of the most rapidly ageing populations in the EU over the coming decades. Revenue increases will not be sufficient to fund all of these additional costs. This is because growth in the productive capacity of the Irish economy is set to slow significantly, as demographic trends weigh on additional labour supply. As public revenue evolves in line with economic growth, slower revenue growth will make it more difficult for the public finances to absorb the increase in age-related spending.

Up until the passing of the Social Welfare Act 2020, the State Pension Age (SPA) was legislated to increase to 67 in 2021 and 68 in 2028. The analysis undertaken by the Department includes analysis on the projected long-term cost of this change in legislation, based on the SPA remaining at 66 years of age for the projection period. While the analysis does not refer specifically to the impact solely on the Exchequer, the analysis suggests keeping the SPA unchanged at 66 years of age will result in significant additional annual expenditure on pensions. The increasing SPA scenario estimates that annual pension expenditure would be 0.9 percentage points of GNI\* lower in 2070 than the baseline with an unchanged SPA. The estimated cumulative cost of this policy decision is projected to amount to approximately €50 billion by 2070.[2]

In addition, the Department's analysis also foresees a significant impact on the general government balance and debt-to-income ratio as a result of population ageing. In a no-policy change scenario, age-related increases in public expenditure and a slower pace of revenue growth are predicted to lead to the emergence of a significant deficit by the end of the next decade, reaching around 3 per cent of GDP (4.7 per cent of GNI\*). The deficit is projected to continue to increase sharply thereafter, reaching just below 6 per cent of GDP (9.4 per cent of GNI\*) by 2070, without policy intervention. As a result of these developments, the debt-to-income ratio is projected to increase by 54 percentage points of GDP, (or 86 percentage points of GNI\*) to reach 112 per cent of GDP, (182 per cent of GNI\*), by 2070. The Department's analysis estimates that maintaining the SPA at 66 accounts for nearly 20 percentage points of the increase in the debt-to-GNI\* ratio of 86 percentage points to 182 per cent of GNI\*.

[1] <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c199e-department-of-finance-submission-to-the-commission-on-pensions/>.

[2] Assuming discount rate of 4 per cent per annum.

### **Banking Sector**

32. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether the policy on the State's shareholding in the banks (details supplied) should be reviewed given the recent developments and the consolidation within the banking and financial sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21076/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Government does not see the State as a long-term investor in the banking sector and its policy of selling down its investments in the Irish banks remains unchanged. However, given the extent of these investments, this was never going to be achieved in the short term and was always going to require a series of sell down transactions possibly spread over more than one market cycle.

In relation to the Deputy's question on whether recent events should influence our thinking here, what the country needs is more private sector investment in its banking sector. Government can play an important role in many ways but it should not be a major owner of banks, which is about taking risk and deciding who should get credit and who should not. It is by definition a volatile business where one's investment can be severely impacted or even lost in extremis.

Significant progress has been made in monetising the €29.4bn originally invested in AIB, BOI and PTSB. To date, €19.2bn has been received in the form of sale proceeds, investment income and liability guarantee fees. The Department of Finance reviews opportunities on a continuous basis, to sell its remaining investments in these banks which are currently valued at approximately €5.5bn. Any such sales will be subject to market conditions and will be transacted in a manner which generates the best value for the taxpayer.

### **Central Bank of Ireland**

33. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance if he has met with the Central Bank to ascertain its views on announcements (details supplied). [21077/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy is aware, my Department and I engage with the Central Bank and the Governor of the Central Bank on a regular basis. Throughout these engagements my Department and the Bank discuss a wide variety of issues.

This effective engagement with the Central Bank is accomplished through a mutual understanding and respect of the roles carried out by the Department and the Bank.

The Central Bank is entirely independent in the performance of its functions. The independence of the Central Bank is enshrined in the Treaties of the European Union and in the Statute of the European System of Central Banks.

### **Banking Sector**

34. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance if he sought the views of the Central Bank on a statement (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21078/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Deputy will be aware that it is the responsibility of the Regulator to set the level of capital which each bank is required to hold. These capital levels are determined within the context of a robust EU regulatory framework which is designed to ensure a safe banking system that can support the economic needs of each member state.

One of the key inputs in this regard is historical loss experience and, as is well understood, Ireland's experience during the Global Financial Crisis was amongst the worst in Europe. Accordingly, Irish banks are required to hold more capital than in other jurisdictions for the same asset classes.

Two recent research papers by the Department of Finance and the BPFII analysed this matter specifically in relation to the level of capital required to be held by Irish banks for residential mortgages relative to other European jurisdictions. Both of these papers were consistent in their summary of the relative position and the underlying reasons for this. These papers are publicly available on the Department of Finance and BPFII websites.

### **Banking Sector**

35. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether a public review on the strategy for the banking sector should be undertaken to set out a vision for the future particularly at present when he is in a position of significant influence (details supplied).; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21079/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The announcement by KBC Bank Ireland last week that it is leaving is a very significant development for the retail financial sector in Ireland, particularly as it comes so soon after NatWest's decision to withdraw Ulster Bank from the Irish market. Firstly, I am concerned about the impact of this decision for KBC's staff and customers. It also raises concerns regarding wider issues in the retail financial sector, in particular for competition and for the sustainability of the sector. Sustainable and responsible competition in the retail financial sector is vital to ensuring that businesses and consumers have a range of banking options available when using financial services and accessing credit.

My Department and I keep the policy framework for the banking sector under regular review and, in light of the events of the past few months, will further examine the policy framework to ensure that it supports a sustainable and competitive dynamic within the retail financial sector.

I presume when the Deputy is referring to me, as Minister, being in a position of significant influence, he is referring to the shareholding held by me on behalf of the State in AIB, Bank of Ireland and Permanent TSB. However, as the Deputy will be aware, 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. Accordingly, I cannot interfere in the operations or strategy decisions taken by the banks on a commercial basis.

### **Banking Sector**

36. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether local control of at least one Irish bank is very important to the development of the small Irish economy in a globalised world and to assist the operation of businesses by SMEs and taxpayers in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21080/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Government does not see the State as a long-term investor in the banking sector and its policy of selling down its investments in the Irish banks remains unchanged. However, given the extent of these investments, this was never going to be achieved in the short term and was always going to require a series of sell down transactions possibly spread over more than one market cycle.

In relation to the Deputy's question on my views on retaining control of at least one bank, what the country needs is more private sector investment in its banking sector. Government can and does play an important role in many ways, providing various support schemes for instance, but it should not be a major owner of banks, which is about taking risk and deciding who should get credit and who should not. It is by definition a volatile business where one's investment can be severely impacted or even lost in extremis.

Significant progress has been made in monetising the €29.4bn originally invested in AIB, BOI and PTSB. To date, €19.2bn has been received in the form of sale proceeds, investment income and liability guarantee fees. The Department of Finance reviews opportunities on a continuous basis, to sell its remaining investments in these banks which are currently valued at approximately €5.5bn. Any such sales will be subject to market conditions and will be transacted in a manner which generates the best value for the taxpayer.

### **National Children's Science Centre**

37. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the planned national children's science centre; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20888/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I wish to advise the Deputy that the National Children's Science Centre project is currently the subject of Arbitration proceedings with its promoters, the Irish Children's Museum Ltd (ICML). As the matter is subject to an Arbitration process, it would be inappropriate for me to comment further at this stage.

### **Coastal Protection**

38. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of an application (details supplied); if the project is to be funded by the Office of Public Works; if so, the cost; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20958/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** It is a matter for Local Authorities, in the first instance, to assess and address problems of coastal erosion in their areas. Where necessary, Local Authorities may put forward proposals to relevant central Government Departments, including the OPW, for funding of appropriate measures depending on the infrastructure or assets under threat.

In this regard, the OPW Minor Flood Mitigation Works & Coastal Protection Scheme provides funding to Local Authorities to undertake minor flood mitigation or coastal protection works or studies, costing less than €0.75 million each, to address localised flooding and coastal protection problems within their administrative areas. Funding for coastal erosion risk management studies may also be applied for under this scheme. Funding of up to 90% of the cost is available for projects which meet the eligibility criteria including a requirement that the proposed measures are cost beneficial. The OPW has published guidelines for coastal erosion risk

management measures and funding applications under the Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme, available on the OPW website – [www.gov.ie/opw](http://www.gov.ie/opw).

I am pleased to advise the Deputy that Wexford County Council has been notified that funding of €36,000 has been approved for an application submitted under the OPW Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection scheme for the Detailed Design Study for the Seaview, Kilmore Coastal Protection Scheme.

### Civil Service

39. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will respond to matters raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20984/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform, I have responsibility under the Public Service Management Acts for recruitment to the Civil Service and this includes the fixing of eligibility criteria for competitions for recruitment to the civil service.

As the Deputy will be aware, appointments to the civil service are by way of open competition and the Public Appointments Service (PAS), that operates under licence from the Commission for Public Service Appointments, is the principal recruiter for the civil service.

The eligibility criteria for the grade of Executive Officer is not restricted to a requirement to have attained an appropriate standard in the Leaving Certificate. Rather the current educational criteria for an Executive Office at the time of application is to:

- (i) have obtained a minimum Level 7 NFQ qualification; or
- (ii) have obtained in the Established Leaving Certificate Examination a minimum of Grade D (or post 2017 Leaving Certificate O6 grade) at Ordinary level in Mathematics and Irish or English, having obtained a minimum of Grade C (or post 2017 Leaving Certificate H4 grade) in at least five subjects at Higher level; or hold a qualification, that in the opinion of the Public Appointments Service, is of a standard in terms of both level and volume of learning that is of at least an equivalent or higher standard; or
- (iii) have completed and passed all examinations in Year 1 of a three or four-year programme leading to a minimum Level 7 NFQ qualification; or
- (iv) be serving as a Civil Servant with at least two years' service and have obtained at least five subjects in the Established Leaving Certificate Examination (including Mathematics and Irish or English), three of which should be minimum Grade C (or post 2017 Leaving Certificate H4 grade) at Higher level, the others should be at a minimum Grade D (or post 2017 Leaving Certificate O6 grade) at Ordinary level; or have passed an examination(s) which would be acceptable to the Public Appointments Service as being of at least an equivalent standard to the Established Leaving Certificate.

The grade of Clerical Officer or Temporary Clerical Officer is the traditional entry grade for those interested in a career in the civil service for which there is no Leaving Certificate requirement. Rather, the present criteria is that candidates should have a “good general level of education” being equivalent to Intermediate/Junior Certificate standard as well as the demonstrable capability, requisite knowledge, skills and competencies to carry out the role of Clerical Officer.

The eligibility criteria and competencies for all civil service grades are kept under review. There is a balance to be struck between civil service grades in terms of respective educational qualifications and role-specific competencies. I am not considering any changes at this time in relation to the eligibility criteria for the grade of Executive Officer.

It is the responsibility of each candidate, at the time of making an application to PAS, to satisfy themselves that they meet the eligibility criteria for a specific post and to make appropriate enquiries should they be unsure. Applications are accepted by the Public Appointments Service and civil service employers in good faith based on the eligibility self-declaration made by candidates when applying for a competition.

Should a candidate successfully progress to a later phase of a competition process, additional clearance checks are completed at that time, which include a review of a candidate's declared service, qualifications, etc. to ensure the eligibility criteria are met. Should it be identified that the candidate does not meet the eligibility criteria, they will be removed from participating any further in a competition.

### **Transport Policy**

40. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21057/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport is the principal Government Department with responsibility for active travel. Among a broad set of responsibilities across the transport area, the National Transport Authority (NTA) has certain statutory objectives and functions in relation to the promotion of active travel.

Project Ireland 2040, which was launched in February 2018, sets out the Government's policy on spatial planning and infrastructure development over the period to 2040. Active travel is a feature of the two overarching policy documents – the National Planning Framework and the ten-year National Development Plan (NDP) 2018-2027.

My Department recognises the environmental, health and well-being, economic and social benefits of active travel. In this context, staff in my Department have access to the Cycle to Work Scheme operated by the Revenue Commissioners. In operation since 2009, the Cycle to Work Scheme is a tax incentive scheme that allows employers to purchase new bikes and related safety equipment for employees who repay the costs through an agreed schedule of deductions from their gross salary. The amount of salary sacrificed is exempt from tax, employee's PRSI and income levies.

My Department also provides secure bike sheds, shower facilities and dry-rooms where feasible for staff who travel to and from work by bicycle or by other modes of active travel. In addition, a bicycle repair station for staff use has recently been installed at the rear of the Government Buildings campus. This repair station will contain basic tools and consumables to assist cyclists should they encounter routine maintenance issues.

More generally, my Department is committed to a culture of staff wellbeing and this is reinforced by the Department's Health and Wellbeing Strategy – "Your PERSONAL Wellbeing", which was launched in November 2020. It has been well documented that the health and wellbeing of staff directly affects employee engagement and performance. Many of the initiatives under the strategy are focused on encouraging staff to be more active, including, for example,

a recent 'step challenge'.

I am advised that the position in relation to the bodies under the aegis of my Department is as set out below.

### **Office of Public Works (OPW)**

Due to the current Covid 19 health pandemic, the OPW, in line with Government policy encourages staff to work from home where possible and does not currently encourage employees to attend the workplace. The OPW will continue to encourage staff to use active travel when it is safe to return to the workplace by approving employee applications on the cycle to work scheme, where 79 applications were approved in 2020. The OPW provide secure bike sheds / storage facilities, shower and changing facilities and lockers for staff in the main offices who choose active forms of travel. The OPW will continue to encourage the use of the Travel Pass for all TaxSaver Travel Pass Tickets which will contribute to active travel. There was a 6 month extension of the 2020 Travel Pass for all TaxSaver Travel Pass Ticket Holders due to Covid 19 and this brings current Travel Pass Tickets up to the end of June 2021.

### **Public Appointments Service (PAS)**

With society's increasing concern for the sustainability of our natural resources, the Public Appointments Service is committed to meeting their responsibilities to ensure that their services are delivered through the efficient use of resources with minimal environmental impact. In collaboration with their Corporate Social Responsibility committee, PAS encourage staff to travel to work using their own energy where possible. In the last 5 years, 10% of the PAS workforce have availed of the cycle to work scheme and the Public Appointments Service has a bike shed on-site where staff can store their bicycles safely. Staff are not encouraged to drive to work due to a limited number of parking spaces on-site which are reserved for staff who need them on an exceptional basis, including those who require them as a reasonable accommodation. 30% of the workforce avail of the annual travel pass scheme which encourages staff to travel to work using public transport. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Public Appointments Service has prioritised the health, safety and wellbeing of PAS people and, as a result, all staff have been working remotely since March 2020. As part of the Staying Well and Connected programme, PAS have run three step challenges and a 40 day fitness challenge over the past 12 months which have all encouraged PAS staff to increase their daily step count and also to build a walking commute into their daily routine.

### **National Shared Services Office (NSSO)**

The NSSO supports and encourages active travel by providing secure parking for bicycles, promoting walking options, and providing changing and shower facilities on-site for staff. Staff do not have guaranteed access to car parking in any of the NSSO sites. In addition, the NSSO encourages staff to avail of the Cycle to Work Scheme. Currently during the pandemic, 95% of NSSO staff are working from home and public transport is reduced to 25% capacity so active travel is promoted for health and wellbeing reasons and reduction of risk during the pandemic. The NSSO also has an Employee Engagement programme in place that promotes and organises staff activities, including active travel, for example over 100 NSSO staff completed 7,000 miles as part of a 56-mile challenge in the month of February.

### **Office of the Ombudsman**

The Office of the Ombudsman encourages staff at every available opportunity to walk or cycle to work, most recently in the Office's April 2021 'Green Team' bulletin which issued to all staff. Walking and cycling to work are also included as one of the aims of the Office in its

'Resource Efficiency Action Plan 2020'. The Office facilitates employees to use active travel through reminding staff of the existence of the cycle to work scheme and also by providing showers and lockers for staff who choose to walk or cycle. The cycle to work scheme is advertised to all new staff members as part of the Office's induction programme. Staff are made fully aware of the details of the scheme, the terms and conditions and the application process. It is also regularly promoted to existing staff through HR updates and health and wellbeing initiatives organised by the Office's Wellness Committee. The level of uptake in the scheme since its introduction has been consistently high. In addition, other methods of promoting an active workforce include the setting up of running and walking clubs in the Office.

### **State Laboratory**

The Cycle to Work Scheme is available to all State Laboratory staff and over 25% of staff have availed of it. The State Laboratory provides showering facilities, wet gear drying facilities and secure, sheltered bicycle parking on its premises to facilitate staff who require it.

### **National Lottery Regulator (ORNL)**

The ORNL facilitates employees to use active travel to commute to work by enabling them to avail of the Cycle to Work scheme. In addition, shower facilities can be used by staff who may wish to run/cycle to work and shower before reporting to work. As part of the ORNL's Covid 19 response, all ORNL staff have been facilitated to work from home and typically do so.

## **Flood Prevention Measures**

41. **Deputy Noel Greally** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if there are plans to develop a flood defence scheme in Claddagh, Galway city from the Claddagh to Grattan Park; if so, the details of this flood defence plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21065/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The Flood Risk Management Plan (FRMP) for the Corrib River Basin, launched in 2018, included a recommendation for a flood relief scheme for Galway City, including the Claddagh area, which was one of 118 projects identified nationwide from the National Flood Risk Management Plans. The Plan proposed to protect approximately 940 properties from flooding with a preliminary cost estimate in the region of €10m. Details of the outline proposal are available on [floodinfo.ie](https://www.floodinfo.ie), or in the Flood Risk Management Plan at <https://www.floodinfo.ie/publications/?t=22&a=658>. Following discussions between the Office of Public Works (OPW) and Galway City Council, agreement was reached that the City Council would lead the development of the scheme with technical advice and funding being provided by OPW.

Following a tender process undertaken by the City Council, consultants were appointed in November, 2020, to review and build on the initial proposals in the FRMP. Public consultation will be to the forefront during the development of options that will eventually lead to a preferred scheme to be brought through the Planning process. It is intended to hold the first Public Consultation Day in the next six weeks. This event will be widely advertised and is likely to be held online due to current Covid-19 restrictions.

A project website will also go live in advance of this Public Consultation Day, which will continue to provide up-to-date information on the project as it moves forward through its development. There will, of course, be several such public engagement events throughout the course of the project, both with the statutory and non-statutory stakeholders and the general public before the final design is chosen in order to keep those living, working and visiting the City fully

informed of developments.

### **Internet Pornography**

42. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her plans to introduce measures to restrict access by children to pornography on smartphones; if internet service providers have a role to play in this regard; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20943/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill will, among other things, empower an Online Safety Commissioner, as part of a new multi-person Media Commission, to issue online safety guidance materials regarding measures to reduce the risk of exposure of minors to age-inappropriate online content. In line with the overall approach of the Bill, guidance materials will focus on systemic measures which an online service can take in order to reduce the exposure of children to that content.

Content which falls under the definition of age-inappropriate online content as set out in the General Scheme of the Bill, includes:

- material containing or comprising gross or gratuitous violence;
- material containing or comprising cruelty towards humans or animals; and,
- material containing or comprising pornography.

The Bill will also provide that online services must have regard to online safety guidance materials in the context of their operations. These provisions of the Bill are device neutral and would apply to online services regardless of how they are accessed.

The General Scheme of the OSMR Bill is currently under-going pre-legislative scrutiny by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. Meanwhile, the Office of the Attorney General is continuing detailed drafting of the Bill.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

43. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if a company (details supplied) and similar rental services are permitted to operate under level 5 restrictions given hotels, camping sites and self-catering cottages are not permitted to operate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20877/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The company to which the Deputy refers is an online sales platform for a variety of accommodation. I can confirm that the provision of any type of non-essential/holiday accommodation services is prohibited under the current Level 5 restrictions. Accommodation may only be provided to those travelling for permitted essential reasons, as specified in the relevant regulations.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

44. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport

and Media if it will be ensured that any guidelines for the hospitality industry make specific reference to self-catering cottages and houses alongside hotels, bed and breakfasts and guest houses; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20878/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** A wide range of sector-specific guidelines are available on the Fáilte Ireland website to assist tourism and hospitality businesses reopen and operate safely in line with Government advice. These include specific guidelines for self-catering properties (which include cottages and houses), in addition to separate guidelines for other types of tourist accommodation (e.g. Hotels & Guesthouses; B&Bs & Historic Houses; Caravan & Camping Parks; Self-Catering properties; and Hostels) and for several other tourism business sectors.

### **Tourism Promotion**

45. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will address the matters raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20881/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I note that the correspondence in question relates to the recent announcement of activity facility centres in selected waterside locations where water-based activities are a key visitor attraction, which are to be funded through a Fáilte Ireland investment scheme in partnership with certain local authorities. As the development and administration of this scheme is an operational matter for Fáilte Ireland, I have referred the Deputy's question to the agency for direct reply to the Deputy. Please contact my private office if you have not received a reply within ten working days.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

46. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she is working on a roadmap for either the return or phased return of the various strands of the light entertainment industry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20960/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The Government's COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 - The Path Ahead plan sets out the Government's objectives for the full recovery of social life, public services and the economy. The plan committed to the development of sectoral guidance for very large purpose built event facilities, for example: stadia, auditoriums, conference or event centres. I established the Live Entertainment Working Group to facilitate stakeholder consultation and develop COVID-19 Guidelines for the Live Entertainment sector. The Group includes stakeholders from across the live entertainment sector as well and those with appropriate technical knowledge in the planning, management and delivery of events. The Group will produce a set of overarching guiding principles that all venue promoters can adopt for their specific purposes. It is chaired by my Department and had its first meeting on 21 April 2021.

The Arts Council and Fáilte Ireland have already entered into a strategic partnership to develop guidance for the safe presentation of festivals and live events. This document is currently at the consultation stage and is due to be published shortly.

While the timeframe for the resumption of entertainment events remains uncertain and, is

dependent on public health considerations, it is critical that a set of COVID-19 guidelines is developed and ready in advance of the re-opening of the sector.

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

47. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when she plans to announce the details of the music entertainment business assistance scheme for the live music industry. [20997/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I was pleased to announce recently a new €50 million suite of additional measures to further support the Live Entertainment Sector this year. As part of this suite, an allocation of €14m will be made available for the Music and Entertainment Business Assistance Scheme (MEBAS) to make a contribution to the overheads of businesses, specifically musicians and related crew, that have been significantly negatively affected by COVID-19 and that do not qualify for other business supports. The main features of this new scheme 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.

Under the scheme, businesses including musicians, singers, lighting and sound crew and audio equipment suppliers - whether sole traders, partnerships or incorporated entities - operating exclusively within the commercial live entertainment sector will be eligible to apply. This scheme has been developed following wide consultation with the sector and will be managed directly by my Department. Department officials are finalising the administrative arrangements for this scheme and it is hoped that the scheme will open for applications in the coming weeks when the necessary IT systems are in place.

### **Transport Policy**

48. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the way in which her Department and agencies under her remit encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [21061/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** In the context of COVID-19, the current recommendation is for Civil and Public Servants to continue working from home.

However, my Department continues to support and facilitate the operation of the Cycle to Work Scheme which encourages cycling to work by the provision of tax exemptions and the facilitation of salary deduction for the purchase of bicycles.

In addition, my Department actively promotes and encourages employees to engage with Health and Well-being initiatives including those that support physical activity.

State Agencies, under the remit of my Department, are also in a position to facilitate the Cycle to Work Scheme. However, with regard to individual initiatives, that would be an operational matter for the Agencies in question.

## **Water Charges**

49. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if grants will be provided for households facing costly connection fees to public water and wastewater infrastructure especially in rural areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20869/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Since 1 January 2014, Irish Water has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning and delivery. Irish Water's charging policies, including in relation to connection charges, are subject to approval by the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities (CRU), in its statutory role as the independent economic regulator of Irish Water.

Part V of the Water Services (No. 2) Act 2013, in particular sets out the CRU's responsibility for the determination of the charges, including connection charges, and charging arrangements, that apply to customers of Irish Water. The CRU determination on the appropriate charges and charging arrangements that apply to new network connections are set out in its detailed decision paper on Connection Charging available on its website at [www.cru.ie](http://www.cru.ie). My Department has no role in the matter.

It may be helpful to note that Irish Water has established a dedicated team to deal with representations and queries from public representatives. The team can be contacted via email to [oireachtasmembers@water.ie](mailto:oireachtasmembers@water.ie) or by telephone on a dedicated number, 1890 57 578.

## **Public Sector Staff**

50. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his attention has been drawn to persons who are over 60 years of age working in the Ordnance Survey repeatedly being asked their retirement date; and his views on whether this is appropriate behaviour. [21074/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I am informed by Ordnance Survey Ireland (OSi) that as part of its workforce planning, a succession planning initiative commenced in 2019 due to the senior age profile of the organisation, that is, 47 per cent of OSi's staff had reached minimum retirement age and had 40 years' service. To manage this challenge, staff in this cadre have been contacted to ascertain what retirement plans they may have, if any, in order to assist OSi with managing the increased number of expected retirements and to research and respond to the potential skills/knowledge loss, so as to aid succession management and also for budgetary reasons in terms of lump sum pension payments. Engagement with this process is voluntary, and OSi has had a good response with this initiative, which has been agreed with the represented trade unions. The initiative has continued annually in 2020 and 2021.

In view of the foregoing, I consider the initiative to be both reasonable and proportionate.

## **Commercial Rates**

51. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on providing rates waivers for funeral homes until 31 December 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20871/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** In order to continue supporting ratepayers, and in recognition of the ongoing impacts of COVID 19 and the associated public health restrictions, the Government has put in place a new, more targeted commercial rates waiver for the first half of 2021. It applies to businesses most seriously affected by the restrictions. Automatic eligibility is extended to hospitality including hotels, pubs and restaurants, leisure and entertainment, personal services such as hairdressers and barbers, and various other sectors. Categories of commercial property, such as offices, industrial premises, and banks are not automatically eligible, but may qualify if they can provide proof of serious impact to their local authority. As provision has been made for businesses that do not automatically qualify to apply, there are no current plans to broaden the scope of automatic eligibility.

### **Environmental Protection Agency**

52. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will request that the EPA provides this Deputy with a copy of the EPA report entitled Drinking Water Quality in Public Supplies 2020 when it is available. [20879/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The EPA is an independent public body established under the Environmental Protection Agency Act, 1992.

I understand that the 2020 report is not yet available, when published it will be made available on the EPA website at [www.epa.ie](http://www.epa.ie) and will also be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas.

The latest EPA Drinking Water Quality in Public Supplies report is for 2019 and this is available in the Oireachtas library and on the EPA's website at [www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/water/drinking](http://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/water/drinking).

### **Wildlife Control**

53. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the derogation for control of wild birds species will be extended given that it is due to expire on 30 April 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20902/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Malcolm Noonan):** I refer to the reply to Questions Nos 751, 762, 763, 764 and 807 of 21 April 2021 which sets out the position in this matter.

### **Rental Accommodation Standards**

54. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to introduce a NCT type system for rental properties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20907/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2019 specify requirements in relation to a range of matters, such as structural repair, sanitary facilities, heating, ventilation, natural light and the safety of gas, oil and electrical supply. All landlords have a legal obligation to ensure that their rented properties comply with these regulations and responsibility for the en-

enforcement of the regulations rests with the relevant local authority.

While Regulations and associated systems are kept under continuous review, I have no plans at this time to introduce NCT-type certification for rental properties.

The Strategy for the Rental Sector set out a series of measures to be introduced to ensure the quality of private rental accommodation by strengthening the applicable standards and improving the inspection and enforcement systems. The Rental Strategy recognises the need for additional resources to be provided to local authorities to aid increased inspections of properties and ensure greater compliance with the Regulations. Provision was made for €2.5 million to be made available to local authorities in 2018, increasing to €4.5 million in 2019 with corresponding inspection rate targets of 10% and 15% respectively. This has enabled local authorities to build inspection capacity incrementally. Significant progress was made across the sector. The number of inspections more than doubled from 19,645 in 2017 to 40,998 in 2019.

The 2020 inspection rate target was 20% and €6 million of Exchequer funding was made available to local authorities. An increased budget of €10 million has been approved to facilitate inspections in 2021. However pandemic restrictions have severely impacted on both inspections and enforcement activity since March 2020.

In response to the pandemic some local authorities have been piloting virtual inspections. Dublin City Council have led this initiative, which entails landlords receiving a checklist for self-assessment and being required to submit photographic/video evidence by email, tenants being invited to raise any non-compliance issues they are aware of and the Council reserving the right to conduct a physical on-site inspection when it is safe to do so.

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

Annual data in respect of the level of inspections carried out by each local authority is available on my Department's website at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/da3fe-private-housing-market-statistics/>.

### **Local Authority Staff**

55. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of outdoor staff currently employed in each of the municipal district councils in east County Cork in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20952/21]

56. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of outdoor staff who were employed in each municipal district council in east County Cork in each of the years 2015 to 2019, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20953/21]

57. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason recruitment of outdoor council staff in east County Cork has possibly regressed in the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20954/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 55 to 57, inclusive, together.

My Department oversees workforce planning for the local government sector, including the monitoring of local government sector employment levels. To this end, my Department gathers aggregate quarterly data on staff numbers in each local authority on a whole time equivalent basis.

However, granular data, in terms of the detailed breakdown of the number of outdoor staff currently employed and the number of staff who were employed in each year from 2015-2019, in each Municipal District in east County Cork, is not collected and consequently is not available in my Department. The relevant information would be available from Cork County Council.

Under section 159 of the Local Government Act 2001, each Chief Executive is responsible for the staffing and organisational arrangements necessary for carrying out the functions of the local authority for which he or she is responsible.

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

58. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will consider those on a temporary pandemic unemployment payment in terms of eligibility for social housing support (details supplied). [20977/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** It is open to anyone to apply for social housing support, applications for which are assessed by the relevant local authority, in accordance with the eligibility and need criteria set down in section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the associated Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011, as amended.

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 (HMP), 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 Additional Superannuation Contribution. 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

Social housing support is intended to address a household's long-term housing need and it is therefore important to note that where households are in need of short term support, such as Rent Supplement, they should make application to the Department of Social Protection.

In relation to the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), Circular 38/2020 regarding the treatment of the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) when assessing and/or reviewing income eligibility for social housing support was issued to local authorities. The Circular advises that the PUP payment should be considered as temporary in the overall context of an applicant household's income.

Decisions on the qualification of specific persons for social housing support and the allocation of that support are a matter solely for the local authority concerned.

### **Wind Energy Guidelines**

59. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if it is planned to bring in new planning regulations in relation to wind turbines in view of the increasing height of these turbines and the issues of flicker and noise that also arise from them; when the most recent regulations came into force; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20987/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** My Department is currently undertaking a focused review of the 2006 Wind Energy Development Guidelines in line with the “preferred draft approach” which was announced in June 2017 by the then Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, in conjunction with the then Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment. The review is addressing a number of key aspects including sound or noise, visual amenity setback distances, shadow flicker, community obligation, community dividend and grid connections.

As part of the overall review process, a strategic environmental assessment (SEA) is being undertaken on the revised Guidelines before they come into effect, in accordance with the requirements of European Union Directive 2001/24/EC on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment, otherwise known as the SEA Directive. SEA is a process by which environmental considerations are required to be fully integrated into the preparation of plans and programmes which act as frameworks for development consent, prior to their final adoption, with public consultation as part of that process.

As part of the SEA process, the previous Minister launched a ten-week public consultation on the draft revised Wind Energy Development Guidelines on 12 December 2019. The documents prepared for consultation are available on my Department’s website at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/8f3c71-public-consultation-on-the-revised-wind-energy-development-guideline/>.

The consultation closed on 19 February 2020. Almost 500 submissions were received as part of the public consultation, many of which are quite detailed and technical in nature. My Department and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC) have analysed the submissions received, in conjunction with the contracted SEA and noise consultants, and are in the process of preparing finalised guidelines having undertaken detailed consideration and analysis of the submissions received.

My Department is currently finalising the technical guidance on the noise aspect in conjunction with DECC (which has primary responsibility for environmental noise matters). However, this piece of work is quite technical in nature and a small number of matters remain to be resolved in this regard.

Once the outstanding issues have been finalised by both Departments, the proposed amendments will need to be reviewed by the SEA consultants in order to conclude the SEA process.

My Department, in consultation with DECC, is endeavouring to finalise and publish the revised Guidelines as quickly as possible. However, the work on the outstanding technical issues has pushed the finalisation of the Guidelines into Q2 2021.

When finalised, the revised Guidelines will be issued under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended. Planning authorities and, where applicable, An Bord Pleanála, must have regard to guidelines issued under section 28 in the performance of their functions generally under the Planning Acts. In the meantime, the current 2006 Wind Energy Development Guidelines remain in force.

## Housing Data

60. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the delivery targets for housing in Galway County Council for 2019, by build, acquisition, leasing and the actual numbers attained in each category; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21008/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department publishes comprehensive programme level statistics on a quarterly basis on social housing delivery activity. The data is available to the end of 2020 and is published on the statistics page of my Department's website, at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/6060e-overall-social-housing-provision/>.

Targets were issued to each local authority for delivery across Build, Acquisition and Leasing. The table below includes the targets and delivery for Galway County Council in 2019.

-	Build	Acquisition	Leasing	Total
Target	191	28	40	259
Delivery	152	47	54	253

## Mica Redress Scheme

61. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if there is a scheme that will allow householders to raise the 10% matching funding for the MICA support scheme to enable them to avail of the scheme given that many householders cannot raise the required funding on their own; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21027/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** There is no scheme or grant aid available from my Department to cover the cost of the 10% homeowner contribution which applies under the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant scheme. Under the Defective Concrete Blocks grant scheme my Department provides funding to cover 90% of the costs of eligible homeowners subject to the funding caps in place. These funding caps are determined by the remediation option being undertaken.

## Transport Policy

62. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21055/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department is committed to providing a healthy and safe working environment, and to improving the quality of working life of staff through the integration of wellbeing in work activities and practices. This commitment involves encouraging and facilitating staff participation in sustainable and active travel measures under the Workplace Travel Plan. This Plan promotes staff use of such travel options when travelling to, from and for work and provides for:

- Staff participation in the Annual Travel Pass and Cycle to Work schemes - the operation of which transferred to PeoplePoint in 2016, and

- The availability of bicycle parking spaces and lockers at Department offices.

My Department's Environmental Management System had its ISO 14001/2015 accreditation recently extended from the Custom House Headquarters in Dublin to our offices in Wexford and Ballina. This comprehensive system addresses staff participation in sustainable transport options through regular internal communications relating to the schemes. In addition, my Department is currently engaged in a review of its participation in the National Transport Authority's Smarter Travel Workplaces scheme with further active travel measures under consideration.

The information requested in relation to bodies under the aegis of my Department is a matter for the individual bodies concerned. Arrangements have been put in place by each Agency to facilitate the provision of information directly to members of the Oireachtas. The contact email address for each agency is set out in the following table:

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

### Middle East Peace Process

63. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the contact he has had with Israeli authorities with regard to the Government commitment to recognise the state of Palestine in order to urgently protect the integrity of Palestinian territory; the specific circumstances that will be required to progress these efforts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20939/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Programme for Government states that the Government will “Honour our commitment to recognise the State of Palestine as part of a lasting settlement of the conflict, or in advance of that, when we believe doing so will progress efforts to reach a Two-State solution or protect the integrity of Palestinian territory”. I have been clear that, in recognition of the lack of progress towards a Two-State solution, I would be prepared to recommend to the Government early recognition by Ireland of a State of Palestine, if and when it might be helpful. This is an issue where there could be benefits to

moving in step with EU partners, and it is a matter that I discuss regularly with EU colleagues. Recognition by Ireland outside the context of an overall peace agreement could, however, affect Ireland's influence on the Israel-Palestine conflict at EU and international level. Timing and context would affect whether such a loss of influence would be matched by a commensurate benefit for the Palestinian people and a positive impact on the peace process. Ireland is committed to supporting a viable Two-State solution, in line with the agreed parameters for a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The matter is discussed regularly at the Security Council.

### **Human Rights**

64. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the description of the human rights situation in the Palestinian Occupied Territory as dire by the UN Special Rapporteur and that Israeli practices amount to violations of international humanitarian and human rights law; the details of results obtained from his public statements, expressions of concern, efforts to build consensus at EU level and various calls for action as indicated in answers to recent questions in Dáil Éireann; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20940/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The human rights situation in the occupied Palestinian territory remains a matter of serious concern.

The protection and promotion of 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. Our active participation at the UN Human Rights Council is particularly important in that regard.

Ireland made a statement in the interactive dialogue with the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on 24 February where we stressed the importance of accountability for all violations of international law committed in the occupied Palestinian territory. Ireland also co-sponsored the recent Human Rights Council Resolutions on Human Rights and Accountability, Self-Determination and Settlements in the occupied Palestinian territory.

Ireland regularly intervenes in interactive dialogues with the UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in the occupied Palestinian territory at the Council and the UN General Assembly. On 18 March, at the most recent session of the Human Rights Council, Ireland made a statement under Item 7 during the General Debate, which urged Israel to halt settlement expansion and demolitions, allow for legal construction for Palestinian communities and called on Israel to facilitate voting in the context of Palestinian elections, including in East Jerusalem.

Ireland also regularly conveys our concerns on human rights issues to the Israeli authorities, both directly and through the EU. I met the Israeli Ambassador on 18 March and conveyed in the strongest terms my concerns on demolitions of humanitarian aid and the issue of settlements. Ireland's Ambassador in Tel Aviv has raised demolitions and settlements with the Israeli authorities and I have also outlined our position during visits to the region.

Ireland also provides financial support to Israeli and Palestinian NGOs working on human rights issues.

### **Human Rights**

65. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has assessed the cir-

cumstances in China that caused a person (details supplied) to leave the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20978/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I am aware of the case of the journalist in question. I do not wish to comment on individual cases but it is nevertheless disappointing and worrying that responsible and respected journalists feel that they cannot continue to do their work in mainland China.

I also note the statement by the EU Spokesperson on this case, from the 2nd April.

Ireland actively works to promote and protect the rights of journalists, media freedom and the right to freedom of expression, both online and offline, through our Embassies and Missions and in relevant international fora, notably the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE.

Ireland recognises that the conditions for foreign media in China are deteriorating, and this has led to a number of foreign correspondents leaving that country. This is regrettable, as it reduces the channels of communication between China and the wider world.

For Ireland, as we seek to engage further with China as an important global actor, the contribution of a free and open media is important in ensuring a shared understanding between us. We continue to support the free and uninhibited flow of news, opinion, and reporting around the world.

## **Passport Services**

66. **Deputy John Paul Phelan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when it is planned to reopen the passport office to deal with ongoing cases and the large volume of backlog cases that have built up while it has been closed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20998/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** In line with the National Framework on Living with COVID-19, the Passport Service continues to provide a high-quality essential service in line with Government measures to reduce social contact and combat the spread of COVID-19.

This essential service is available for those who are required to travel due to the death or serious illness of a family member or meet the criteria for travel as defined in the amendment to the Health Act 1947, which came into effect on 1 February 2021. Supporting documentation is required in such cases.

Applicants who require an urgent or emergency passport, can contact the Passport Service via our Customer Service Hub Webchat function on our website.

Irish citizens who are resident overseas should continue to contact the Passport Service through the local Irish Embassy or Consulate General who continue to provide assistance to all our citizens abroad.

Staff of the Passport Service continue to produce emergency and urgent applications, to offer customer service through WebChat, to assist with consular assistance for Irish citizens overseas and temporary reassignment of staff to the Department of Health. As well as issuing almost 3,000 urgent and emergency passports, the Passport Service has issued approximately 35,000 passports since the beginning of the year. Our Webchat team have also responded to more than 36,000 queries.

While normal processing has paused the Passport Service has a comprehensive plan in place to resume all services, and will do so as soon as possible in line with the National Framework for Living with COVID-19. At present, there are approximately 89,000 Passport Online applications in the system. The return of operations will commence with all applications received via Passport Online. 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.

There are currently approximately 1,900 paper based applications in the system. The Passport Service plans to resume processing of routine paper based applications such as Passport Express and Northern Ireland Passport Express as a priority after online applications have been processed.

## Northern Ireland

67. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his plans to strengthen North-South and British-Irish political institutions following the commitments made in the New Decade, New Approach agreement and following Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21029/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** It is vital that we continue to work closely on a North/South and East-West basis in support of the power-sharing institutions in Northern Ireland and the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement and successor agreements.

North/South cooperation is a central part of the Good Friday Agreement and will remain a core priority for the Government. We welcome that meetings of the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) resumed last year. Regular Ministerial meetings are now taking place across the Council's twelve policy sectors, advancing areas of practical cooperation to our mutual benefit. The most recent plenary meeting of the NSMC took place 18 December 2020.

We are engaging within the NSMC to find new ways of working in the areas where the underlying EU law no longer applies in Northern Ireland. We are committed to this work, and will be taking it forward with urgency.

In implementing the Protocol, the conditions necessary for continued North South Cooperation will be maintained in a range of areas. The Protocol also recognises that new arrangements building on the Good Friday Agreement, and other areas of North South cooperation, can continue to be made on the island of Ireland.

The Government commitments that were made at the time of the NDNA are focused on working with the Executive through the North South Ministerial Council to deliver projects that benefit people across the island. The first implementation review meeting took place in January of this year. We reaffirmed our shared commitment to the implementation of the NDNA and it is hoped that a second meeting will take place in the period ahead.

The Shared Island Initiative and Shared Island Fund are also very important new dimensions of our work here, with a focus on how we can work together, North and South, to meet major strategic challenges and further develop our shared island economy.

In terms of East-West cooperation, we look forward to enhanced roles for the British Irish Council and British Irish Intergovernmental Conference (BIIGC), as set out in the Programme for Government.

During last week's programme of bilateral engagements in London, I reaffirmed the importance of the role of the BIIGC, and my officials are now engaging with the British Government with a view to setting an early date in the period ahead for its next meeting. I joined the Taoiseach and the Tánaiste at the British Irish Council Summit last autumn which was hosted by Scotland, and I look forward to the next Summit meeting to be hosted by Northern Ireland in June.

We are also taking new steps to strengthen the East-West relationship in the post-Brexit context. We are implementing joint action plans with the devolved administrations in Wales and Scotland, and will open a Consulate General for the North of England in July.

We will continue to engage intensively with the British Government and all parties in Northern Ireland, as we work in support of the full implementation of the New Decade, New Approach agreement.

### **Transport Policy**

68. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21052/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** In line with Healthy Ireland, the national framework for improved health and wellbeing 2013-2025, the Department of Foreign Affairs is committed to promoting increased physical activity among its staff including how they travel to work. This has predominately been achieved through the promotion of the Government's 'Cycle to Work' Scheme, which is a tax incentive scheme to encourage employees to cycle to work. Under the scheme an employer can pay for a new bicycle (including bicycle accessories) and the employee then repays the cost in regular instalments from their gross salary. Since its inception and up to the end of 2020, 442 Department staff had availed of the scheme. This scheme has been further supported by the Department through additional investment in bike racks, lockers and showering facilities.

### **Air Corps**

69. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Defence if the Air Corps pilot service commitment scheme will be retained in the long-term following its success and learnings gained from previous schemes; if he will extend this scheme further to the air crew and technical personnel to ensure that these vital services continue to operate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21072/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Public Service Pay Commission report on recruitment and retention in the Defence Forces recommended the reintroduction of an Air Corps Flying Officers service commitment scheme. Accordingly, a service commitment scheme was re-introduced in 2019.

Under the terms of the Scheme applicants must commit to a three, five or eight year employment term. Payments for service commitments are made through staged annual payments. A terminal bonus payment is made to those Air Corps Flying Officers who commit to a full period of five years or eight years and in certain other limited circumstances.

I am pleased to say that a total of 15 Air Corps Flying Officers successfully applied for the Service Commitment Scheme in 2019. The 2020 Scheme which was launched in July 2020 at-

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tracted a further 10 applicants, bringing the total number of Officers availing of the Air Corps Flying Officers - Service Commitment Scheme to 25. There will be a further iteration of the Scheme in 2021.

There are no plans to extend the scheme beyond 2021 and there are no plans to extend the scheme to other personnel in the Air Corps.

I am pleased to say that a recruitment campaign for Aircraft Apprentice Technicians was recently launched and further recruitment initiatives are also under consideration.

## **Air Corps**

70. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Defence if a guarantee will be given that any changes necessary to Defence Force Regulations CS4 and its accompanying administrative instructions will be carried out in the case that the Air Corps is directed by Government to provide part of the search and rescue contract currently being overseen by the Department of Transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20948/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Since 2004 the Irish Coast Guard has had overall responsibility for the provision of Search and Rescue services within the Irish Search and Rescue domain. From within the Defence Organisation, both the Naval Service and the Air Corps provide support to the Irish Coast Guard in maritime Search and Rescue operations on an “as available” basis. A Service Level Agreement is in place setting out their roles and responsibilities in this regard.

No decision has yet been taken to change any aspect of the current delivery model of Search and Rescue (SAR) aviation services in Ireland’s SAR domain. There is, as you are aware, an ongoing project under the remit of the Department of Transport, to consider, develop and bring to fruition a new Marine Search and Rescue aviation contract for future service provision.

In this context, late last year, I asked my officials to engage further with the Department of Transport to explore the option of the Air Corps providing some element of the next generation SAR aviation service while at the same time ensuring that the service meets domestic and international obligations for SAR and represents value for money for the State. This process is currently ongoing.

My priority as Minister for Defence is to ensure that the operational capability and ultimate viability of the Defence Forces, including the Air Corps, is maintained to the greatest extent possible to enable them to carry out their roles as assigned by Government. In terms of the SAR process underway, ultimately, decisions on the scope, nature and procurement strategy for the next service will be a matter for Government once the detailed business case has been finalised.

## **Military Aircraft**

71. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Defence the arrangements for the establishment of an independent military air regulator within his Department, the establishment of which has been recommended by previous independent safety reports and is also common practice in other EU states; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20949/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Department of Defence commissioned a report from an expert consultancy firm, Bureau Veritas (BV), to examine military aviation regulation, oversight and safety in the Irish context. The BV report recommended that a Mili-

tary Aviation Authority (MAA) should be established and that it should be independent and free from influence or control of any Operating Authority.

Following the presentation of the BV report, the Department of Defence appointed a joint civil/military team whose objective was to establish a basis for the development of an independent authority for the oversight of military aviation safety and licencing on behalf of the Minister for Defence. The joint team developed a draft report which proposed a number of means by which this could be achieved.

Officials in my Department at a senior level are considering these proposals with a view to ensuring that the establishment of such an authority, its staffing and governance is such that the Authority can conduct its essential business in the most efficient way possible and guarantee its fundamental independent nature.

### **Transport Policy**

72. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Defence the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21047/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Cycle to Work Scheme, which was introduced in 2009, is implemented under a salary sacrifice arrangement through an employee's salary. Under this arrangement, my Department funds the purchase of a bicycle and/or safety equipment for the employee who agrees to forego or sacrifice part of his or her salary for over an agreed period in order to cover the cost. The only State body under the aegis of my Department is the Army Pensions Board and its secretary is provided from the staff of my Department.

Since the onset of Covid 19 in early 2020, my Department has actively encouraged staff to work from home, as far as is practicable, in line with public health advice.

### **Teacher Training**

73. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education if the five-day limitation on substitute teaching for final year primary school teaching students will be removed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20865/21]

85. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education if she has considered removing the five-day rule for substitute teachers (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20934/21]

88. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the consultation that has taken place with schools and staff representatives on the potential for reviewing the five day rule for student teachers taking up substitute positions whilst ensuring protection of fully qualified positions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20979/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 73, 85 and 88 together.

The recruitment and appointment of teachers to fill teaching posts is a matter for the individual school authority, subject to procedures agreed under Section 24(3) of the Education Act 1998 (as amended by the Education (Amendment) Act 2012).

In accordance with Department Circular 44/2019 and the Terms and Conditions of Employment for Registered Teachers in Recognised Primary and Post Primary Schools web book which are available on the Department's website under [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie), schools are required to employ appropriately qualified and registered teachers. These also detail a cascade of measures for the recruitment of teachers, prioritising registered teachers over unregistered people.

Other than the limited exceptions under Ministerial Regulations, (S.I. No.32/2014, Education Act 1998 (Unregistered Persons) Regulations 2014), payment is prohibited from Oireachtas funds to people employed as teachers in recognised schools unless they are registered with the Teaching Council.

A number of measures are already in place to support the supply of substitute teachers to schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. These include the establishment of primary school supply panels nationwide, the relaxation of the rules governing career breaks and job sharing which facilitates teachers on career break to sub and job-sharers to take up additional hours as subs.

In addition, the Teaching Council is communicating with Professional Master of Education (PME) students, via the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), to encourage them to register with the Council and register also their availability with *Sub Seeker*, the recruitment portal which matches available teachers with substitutable vacancies.

At this time, the Department is engaging with education partners to ensure that any challenges with regard to filling substitutable vacancies are highlighted. If further measures are required my Department will of course engage with the relevant stakeholders to explore and consider other solutions.

### **School Transport**

74. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education if a student (details supplied) with special needs will be provided with school transportation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20866/21]

**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 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

Under the terms of my Department's Post Primary School Transport Scheme children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 4.8 kms from and are attending their nearest post primary school/education centre as determined by my Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

The purpose of the Department's School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Educational Needs is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children with special educational needs arising from a diagnosed disability.

In general, children with special educational needs are eligible for school transport if they

are attending the nearest school that is resourced to meet their special educational needs. Eligibility is determined following consultation with the National Council for Special Education through its network of Special Education Needs Organisers (SENO).

An application for transport on the Post-Primary Transport Scheme was received for the child referred to by the Deputy. As the family paid late for this service, they were unsuccessful in obtaining a ticket for the 2020/21 school year.

However, in light of the information received, School Transport Section is liaising with Bus Éireann and will contact the family directly in regard to their application.

### **Special Educational Needs**

75. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education if a July provision transport refund will be expedited on behalf of a student (details supplied). [20890/21]

**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 114,100 children, including over 14,700 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.

With regard to transport arrangements for the Summer Programme 2020, my Department committed to providing grant funding to support families with the cost of transport arrangements for those children who were eligible for school transport and who were approved to participate in the school based Summer Programme.

School Transport Section has processed payment of these grants to all eligible families for which all required details had been received. To date, payment has been made to over 900 families and School Transport Section is continuing to process payments of these grants to families who are eligible as information is received.

I am pleased to advise that payment of grant funding is currently being processed in respect of the pupil referred to by the Deputy and is due for payment in the coming week.

### **Special Educational Needs**

76. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education if all new school builds will include the construction of ASD classrooms; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20908/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** In the case of all new schools, it is general practice to include a Special Education Needs Base (SEN Base) in the accommodation brief for new school buildings, unless local circumstances indicate that it will not be required. Typically, a two classroom SEN Base is provided in new primary schools and a two or four classroom SEN Base is provided in new post primary schools.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has a statutory function to plan and co-ordinate the provision of education and support services to children with special educational needs, in consultation with the relevant education partners and the Health Service Executive

(HSE). This includes the establishment of special class and special school placements in various geographical areas where there is an identified need.

In deciding where to establish a special class in an area, the NCSE take account of the current and projected demand and the available school accommodation both current and planned. The Council ensures that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all children who have been identified as needing special class placements.

When the NCSE sanction a special class in a school, the school can apply to my Department for capital funding to re-configure existing spaces within the school building to accommodate the class and/or to construct additional accommodation. Similarly, where special schools wish to expand provision, the school can apply to my Department for capital funding to accommodate additional placements.

Details of all special classes for children with special educational needs are available on [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

### **Special Educational Needs**

**77. Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education if she plans to produce a five-year forecast of the current and future need for special needs education places in the catchment area of each school and to communicate this demand to schools within each area within six months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20909/21]

**78. Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education if she plans to publish a list by school each June of all available school places in ASD units for the coming school year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20910/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 77 and 78 together.

It is my belief that children with special educational needs should receive their education in placements which are appropriate to their needs alongside their peers wherever possible unless such an approach would be inconsistent with the best interests of the individual child or other children in the school.

This approach is consistent with the provisions of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004.

My Department’s policy is therefore to provide for the inclusive education of children with special educational needs in mainstream schools. The majority of children with special needs attend mainstream education with additional supports

This policy is supported by significant investment by 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.

Only where it has been assessed that the child is unable to be supported in mainstream education, are special class placements or special school placements recommended and provided for.

It is therefore not the case that special educational placements are required to support all children with special educational needs, nor is it intended that this should be the case.

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.

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 also 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.

I should also clarify that the NCSE does not maintain waiting lists for schools. Boards of management of individual schools are responsible for such enrolment matters.

The NCSE is working with schools to encourage and support the opening of new special classes at all levels and has specific plans in place to increase the number of places available.

The Deputy will be aware of the process underway in South Dublin under Section 37A of the Education Act, 1998. Statutory notices issued under the Act together with the representations received from the schools and their patrons are published on my Department's website.

I also announced the establishment of a new special school (Our Lady of Hope School) in Crumlin, Dublin 12 last December. Both the NCSE and my Department are working closely with the patron and the school's management team on the practical arrangements required to progress this project as speedily as possible. I have also recently announced the establishment of a new special school in Cork to help cater for demand in that area for September 2021.

Finally, I can reassure the Deputy that the local Special Educational 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, the types and locations of these classes is published on the NCSE website and is available at [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

### **School Transport**

79. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education if she will further review an appeal for school transport assistance by a person (details supplied). [20912/21]

**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

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year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 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 Department's Post-Primary School Transport Scheme children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 4.8 kilometres from and are attending their nearest school/education centre as determined by my Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

While it is the prerogative of parents to send their children to the school of their choice, eligibility for school transport is to the nearest school.

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, but who completed the application process on time are considered for spare seats that may exist after eligible children have been facilitated; such seats are referred to as concessionary seats.

Concessionary transport may vary from year to year and cannot be guaranteed for the duration of a child's post primary school education cycle. Where the number of applications for transport on a concessionary basis exceeds the number of seats available, Bus Éireann determines the allocation of the tickets and refunds payments made on behalf of those concessionary applicants for whom no seats remain.

Bus Éireann has advised that the pupils referred to by the Deputy are not eligible for transport as they are not attending their nearest school. The pupils were not successful in obtaining a concessionary seat for the 2020/2021 school year.

Payment for transport was received for this pupil on 07/09/2020. A refund was issued to this family on 17/12/2020.

All school transport services are reviewed over the summer months. Arising from this review, routes may be altered, extended or withdrawn depending on the number and location of eligible children who will be availing of school transport for the following school year.

In relation to any concerns regarding safety issues when travelling to a school bus pick up location, there is an onus of responsibility on parents/guardians to arrange to bring any pupil availing of a school transport service, to and from that pick-up point of that school bus service, taking whatever safety precautions they consider sufficient in doing so, and accompanying the children to ensure their safety and allay any concern.

### **Special Educational Needs**

80. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if she will address a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20913/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the deputy is aware, all children edu-

cated in Ireland are expected to have the opportunity to study Irish to an appropriate standard, and that an exemption from the study of Irish may be granted by school management in the exceptional circumstances outlined in circular 0052/2019 (Primary) and 0053/2019 (Post Primary) only. The Department of Education website has guidelines and FAQs on exemptions from the study of Irish which provide further assistance to schools and parents on the matter of exemptions from the study of Irish. These can be accessed here: <https://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Information/Irish-Exemption/>

In line with other department policies in the area of special educational needs, the circulars on the granting of exemptions from the study of Irish have moved away from a diagnostic categorical model to a needs-based model. Therefore a diagnosis of an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or other condition is not a requirement for granting an exemption from the study of Irish which is a matter for the school. While an external report might recommend an exemption, it is up to the school to decide if they have the evidence, (ongoing support, response to intervention and current level of need as identified in school testing) when considering the exceptional circumstances in which an exemption should be granted. The granting of an exemption from the study of Irish should not be a key factor in planning for the provision of special education teaching for a pupil.

Subsection 2.2.c of the circular makes provision for pupils in mainstream schools who are encountering persistent literacy difficulties across the curriculum and therefore assessment of those literacy difficulties is carried out in the language of instruction of the school (English). The assessment is not intended to identify pupils who have difficulty with learning Irish only.

In the case of students in special schools and in special classes in mainstream schools, and in recognising the authority devolved to the management authorities in decision making concerning the Irish language learning needs of the students concerned, a formal application for a Certificate of Exemption is not required. Pupils in special schools and in special classes in mainstream schools will therefore be exempt without holding a Certificate of Exemption. A Certificate of Exemption from the study of Irish may be granted by the management authorities of the special school/class to a pupil in order to facilitate their transition back to a mainstream school/ class.

In line with the department's policy special schools/schools with special classes are expected and encouraged to provide all pupils, to the greatest extent possible and in a meaningful way, with opportunities to participate in Irish language and cultural activities at a level appropriate to their learning needs.

A formal application for an exemption from the study of Irish is required for students who meet the criteria outlines in Subsection 2.2 of the Circular but are not enrolled in a special class.

In relation to stress and anxiety, schools can best promote the wellbeing of students through a multi-component, preventative, whole school approach. In line with best practice, The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) encourages schools to adopt a whole school, continuum of support approach to provide for children and young people's wellbeing needs. This involves three levels: Support for All, Support for Some and Support for Few. <https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Services/National-Educational-Psychological-Service-NEPS-/Model-of-Service.html>.

If the parent/guardian or student over 18 years of age is not satisfied that the school principal has followed the correct procedures in making a decision to refuse to grant an exemption from the study of Irish, then the parent/guardian or student over 18 years of age can complete an Irish Exemption Appeal Form setting out the specific reason(s) why the decision is being appealed and the circumstances in which it is considered that the process has not been correctly

applied. The completed Irish Exemption Appeal Form should be submitted within 30 calendar days from the date the decision of the school not to grant an exemption was notified in writing to the parent(s)/guardian(s)/student.

Officials in my department have enquired into the case above and note that the principal of the school determined that the pupil's circumstances do not meet the criteria set out in the circular and that no appeal was received by the department in relation to the decision. Officials from the department have previously responded to correspondence from the child's mother on the matter and have advised her that it is not possible to grant an exemption outside of the exceptional circumstances outlined in the circulars.

As is the case for a pupil/student who encounters difficulty with the study of Irish and who does not have an exemption from the study of Irish, schools are required to address a wide diversity of needs by providing a differentiated learning experience for pupils/students in an inclusive school environment.

The Primary Language Curriculum is for children of all abilities in all school contexts. This is informed by the principles of inclusion and the benefits of bilingualism for all students that underpin the Primary Languages Curriculum. It recognises and supports pupils' engagement with Irish and English at different stages and rates along their language-learning journey. It builds on the language knowledge and experience that pupils bring to the school. The Progression Continua in the Primary Language Curriculum provide a framework for teachers to identify the pupil's stage of language development and to plan interventions that support the development of language skills and competences in Irish and in English in an integrated manner, emphasising the transferability of language skills across languages. All pupils are encouraged to study the language and achieve a level of personal proficiency that is appropriate to their needs and ability.

Similarly, at post-primary level, the Irish language curriculum is informed by the principles of inclusion and the benefits of bilingualism for all students that underpin the Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) and curricular provision in senior cycle. Students should be encouraged to study the language and achieve a level of personal proficiency that is appropriate to their ability.

### **Special Educational Needs**

81. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Education the schools which have been compelled to open ASD classes in Dublin 12; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20920/21]

83. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Education the status of plans to further compel schools to open ASD classes in Dublin 12; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20922/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 81 and 83 together.

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.

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. 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, including South Dublin, where increases in population and other issues have led to concerns regarding a shortage of school places.

The Deputy will be aware of the process underway in South Dublin under Section 37A of the Education Act, 1998. Statutory notices issued under the Act together with the representations received from the schools and their patrons are published on my Department's website. As the legal process is still underway, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage.

I also announced the establishment of a new special school (Our Lady of Hope School) in Crumlin, Dublin 12 last December. Both the NCSE and my Department are working closely with the patron and the school's management team on the practical arrangements required to progress this project as speedily as possible.

Finally, I can reassure the Deputy that the local Special Educational 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, the type and location of these classes is published on the NCSE website and is available at [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

### **Schools Building Projects**

**82. Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Education the status of a school (details supplied) that is in tender for ASD classes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20921/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I am pleased to inform the Deputy that, in relation to the Junior National School referred to, my Department has recently approved this project to go to Construction Stage for a one-classroom SEN base, two mainstream classroom with ensuite toilets, and WC for assisted users under the Additional Accommodation Scheme. The project is expected to commence on-site shortly.

In relation to the National School referred to, my Department granted approval under the Additional Accommodation Scheme 2020 to build a two-classroom SEN base and one WC for Assisted Users. The Department received an Emergency Works Scheme (EWS) application from the school in October 2020 relating to alteration works to main entrance doors and fire exit doors which is currently being assessed in terms of the feasibility of incorporating these

works into this project. The Additional Accommodation project is currently at the Design Stage and a Stage 1/2a Report is required to be submitted at this time.

Both projects have been devolved for delivery to the School Authority to advance in that context.

*Question No. 83 answered with Question No. 81.*

### **School Staff**

84. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education if schools will still lose a teacher in September 2021 given the Covid-19 pandemic (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20931/21]

**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.

For the 2021/22 school year, an improvement of one point in the appointment threshold in primary schools has been introduced and schools will be provided with class teachers on the basis of 1 teacher for every 25 pupils which is a historical low ratio. In addition, a three point reduction in the retention scale has also been introduced for September 2021. These measures will help to ensure that less pupils are required to recruit or retain a teacher.

The staffing process contains an appeals mechanism for schools to submit a staffing appeal under certain criteria to an independent Primary Staffing Appeals Board. The staffing arrangements for primary schools for the 2021/22 school year are set out in Circular 19/2021, available on the Department website.

*Question No. 85 answered with Question No. 73.*

### **School Transport**

86. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Education if she will consider recognising Carrigtwohill and Midleton, County Cork as one education centre under the school transport scheme for second-level students; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20944/21]

**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 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school. Under the terms of my Department's School Transport Scheme, children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 3.2kms at primary and 4.8kms at post-primary and are attending their nearest School/Education Centre as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who completed the application and payment process on time have been accommodated on school transport services for the 2020/21

school year where such services are in operation.

Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis only and will be facilitated where spare seats are available after eligible children have been accommodated. Where the number of ineligible children exceeds the number of spare seats available Bus Éireann allocates tickets for the spare seats using an agreed selection process.

In cases where the Department is satisfied that the nearest school is full, eligibility for school transport will be determined based on the distance that children reside from their next nearest school having regard to ethos and language. If a family has further information in regard to the closest school being full they should contact School Transport Section of my Department. Further information in this regard is available on my Department's website *www.education.ie*.

### **Schools Building Projects**

87. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education the progress of the Design and Build Schools 2020-2021 programme; and when projects currently delayed due to Covid-19 are expected to recommence towards construction. [20971/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department is currently in the final stages of the process of establishing a Design & Build contractors framework to which Design and Build projects can be tendered.

During that tender process, some short extension of time requests were submitted by Tenderers for various reasons such as delays in receiving information from resources, delays in design completions, delays in interaction with specialist supply chain members, ongoing disruption caused to working practices and team interaction by the Coronavirus restrictions and the overall impact of Covid-19 restrictions. However, these have been relatively minor. Once the new Contractors Framework is in place, further projects which have already secured planning permission will be tendered to that framework in a timely and structured process.

Work in relation to the design and planning applications for projects at earlier stages of the progression towards tender and construction stages has been ongoing and has not paused. The Deputy may also be aware that school construction sites have remained open during the recent restrictions.

*Question No. 88 answered with Question No. 73.*

### **Special Educational Needs**

89. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education the status of ASD classes in Dublin 12. [20991/21]

90. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education the status of the four schools compelled to open ASD or autism classes in Dublin 12; and if a progress report in relation to same will be provided. [20992/21]

92. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education if additional schools will be compelled to open ASD classes in Dublin 12. [20994/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I pro-

pose to take Questions Nos. 89, 90 and 92 together.

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.

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. 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, including South Dublin, where increases in population and other issues have led to concerns regarding a shortage of school places.

The Deputy will be aware of the process underway in South Dublin under Section 37A of the Education Act, 1998. Statutory notices issued under the Act together with the representations received from the schools and their patrons are published on my Department's website. As the legal process is still underway, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage.

I also announced the establishment of a new special school (Our Lady of Hope School) in Crumlin, Dublin 12 last December. Both the NCSE and my Department are working closely with the patron and the school's management team on the practical arrangements required to progress this project as speedily as possible.

Finally, I can reassure the Deputy that the local Special Educational 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, the type and location of these classes is published on the NCSE website and is available at [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie).

### **Schools Building Projects**

91. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education the status of two schools (details supplied) that are in a tender process; and the status of progress in relation to same. [20993/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I am pleased to inform the Deputy that, in relation to the Junior National School referred to, my Department has recently approved this project to go to Construction Stage for a one-classroom SEN base, two mainstream classroom with ensuite toilets, and WC for assisted users under the Additional Accommodation Scheme.

The project is expected to commence on-site shortly.

In relation to the National School referred to, my Department granted approval under the Additional Accommodation Scheme 2020 to build a two-classroom SEN base and one WC for Assisted Users. The Department received an Emergency Works Scheme (EWS) application from the school in October 2020 relating to alteration works to main entrance doors and fire exit doors which is currently being assessed in terms of the feasibility of incorporating these works into this project. The Additional Accommodation project is currently at the Design Stage and a Stage 1/2a Report is required to be submitted at this time.

Both projects have been devolved for delivery to the School Authority to advance in that context.

*Question No. 92 answered with Question No. 89.*

### **State Examinations**

93. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Education the protocols which are currently in place for a student with epilepsy should they have a seizure during a State examination; the process which a student must follow should they not be able to complete the exam owing to their condition; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [21011/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The State Examinations Commission has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

### **Transport Policy**

94. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education the way in which her Department and agencies under her remit encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [21048/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm to the Deputy that my Department has a number of initiatives in place to encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work. Such initiatives include:

#### **Cycle-to-work scheme:**

The Cycle-to-work scheme (generally known as the Bike to Work Scheme) is a tax incentive scheme to encourage staff to cycle to work and is in operation in my Department since 2009.

#### **Travel pass scheme:**

The travel pass scheme for public transport is also available to Department staff. The Scheme allows staff to purchase an annual travel pass for bus, dart, train or luas by tax free salary deductions.

#### **Business travel policy:**

My Department's policy in relation to the claiming of travel and subsistence expenses specifies that all travel should be by the shortest practicable routes and by the cheapest practicable

mode of transport. Officers are encouraged to use public transport whenever practicable, with private transport to be used only in limited circumstances.

In addition, my Department promotes the annual European Mobility week which each year focuses on a particular topic related to Sustainable Mobility. The Department also supports the ‘car free day’ by encouraging staff who regularly drive to leave their cars at home.

The information in respect of state bodies, within the scope of the Deputy’s question, is not held by my Department. Contact details for these bodies are set out in the attached document should the Deputy wish to contact them directly with this query.

### 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)	oireachtasqueries@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 andcindy-jane.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.

### Local Employment Service

95. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Social Protection the proposed changes being considered to the current funding model for the tendering process for local employment services nationwide; the timelines in place for these changes; if she has engaged with employee representatives on these proposals; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20918/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department is currently finalising a request for tender to expand local employment services type provision to some parts of the State where no such provision currently do not exist. This RFT, which is required to comply with EU procurement rules, will have no impact on the contracts of existing providers in other areas and it is expected that the tender will prove attractive to local community-based organisations, including Local Development Companies.

In practice, the current funding approach requires a level of scrutiny of day-to-day expenditure, which places an undue administrative burden on both the employment service provider and my Department. Such an approach diverts valuable resources away from supporting clients and as such does nothing to enhance employment outcomes for the long-term unemployed. Moving to a new multi-annual funding approach, which pays for each jobseeker referred to the service, coupled with a strong emphasis on quality of service provision will provide greater flexibility to providers to support individuals who avail of their service.

My Department is investing more in our communities by expanding employment services across the State and providing more support and assistance to the long term unemployed.

Separately, the current contracts for all contracted public employment service provision expire at the end of 2021 and my Department is developing requests for tender to ensure that sufficient, high quality, employment services are procured in a manner that is compatible with procurement rules.

I and my officials have engaged repeatedly with the relevant stakeholders and will continue to do so insofar as is appropriate under procurement regulations.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Pensions Data**

96. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her Department requires pension funds to disclose investments in fossil fuel and extractive companies; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20924/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** There are a number of environmental disclosure requirements which apply to Irish pension schemes.

Directive (EU) 2016/2341 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 December 2016 on the activities and supervision of institutions for occupational retirement provision (the “IORP II Directive”) provides for the consideration of Environmental Social and Governance factors in:

- Investment (Article 19)
- General governance (Article 21)
- Risk management (Article 25)
- Own risk assessment (Article 28)
- Statement of Investment Policy Principles (Article 30)
- Information to be provided to prospective members (Article 41)

Additionally, the EU ‘Action Plan on Financing Sustainable Growth’ (including recent Regulations in relation to Sustainable Finance Disclosures, Sustainable Finance Benchmarks and Taxonomy), will develop over the coming years – and pension providers and schemes will have to address additional reporting requirements as a consequence.

Regulation (EU) 2019/2088 on Sustainability-Related Disclosures in the Financial Services Sector (SFDR) seeks to achieve greater transparency regarding how financial market participants (including IORPs) integrate environmental, social or governance (ESG) risks into their investment decisions and provides for specific disclosure requirements in this regard including:

- Policies on the integration of sustainability risks in the investment decision-making process (Article 3)
- A statement concerning adverse sustainability impacts (Article 4)
- Information on the integration of sustainability risks to be provided as part of pre-contract-

tual disclosures (Article 6)

In line with Action 12 of the 2019 Climate Action Plan, the Department has considered how a requirement could be placed on pension schemes to disclose investment in fossil fuels. In light of the above-mentioned EU initiatives and Ireland's commitment to our 2030 Climate and Energy goals, this action was considered in the context of facilitating meaningful environmental disclosure rather than a strict requirement on pension scheme trustees.

As noted above, significant developments are taking place in the area of sustainable finance across the EU and in the EU and Irish pensions market. Initiatives under the Government's Roadmap for Pensions Reform, including those in respect of Master Trusts and an Automatic Enrolment Programme, will also reshape the Irish pension landscape over the coming years.

The adoption of additional disclosure requirements is being kept under review as key milestones in the wider regulatory framework are reached over the coming months and years.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

### **Community Employment Schemes**

97. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Social Protection if support will be provided to a community centre (details supplied) that wants to retain its maintenance worker under a shortly expiring community employment scheme. [20942/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** The aim of the Community Employment (CE) programme is to enhance the employability of disadvantaged and unemployed people by providing valuable work experience and training opportunities for them within their communities. They are actively encouraged to avail of training to enhance their employability in the labour market. The programme helps break the cycle of unemployment and improves a person's chances of returning to the labour market. Participation on Community Employment is intended to be for a temporary fixed-term period.

The participant is due to finish on Community Employment on Friday July 2nd 2021 as per current Government guidelines. However, given the large numbers due to exit CE as a result of the contract extensions that have been in place during Level 5 restrictions, his finish date will be adjusted in line with plans to allow for the phased exit of participants depending on where he falls on the exit phase. He will exit the scheme with the benefit of over 3 years work experience and Industry-recognised Qualifications in Manual Handling, Covid Awareness, First Aid, HACCP/Food Safety and Safepass. This is the maximum participation time available to the participant at the moment.

On finishing CE, participants will be referred to our JobPath service who will work with them to ensure that the benefits of the experience and training they received during their time on CE are maximised.

The Department can also provide incentives to employers, such as through the JobsPlus scheme which provides monthly payments to employers to offset wage costs where they employ eligible jobseekers. Time spent on Community Employment is counted towards a client's eligibility for JobsPlus which will enhance his opportunity of employment.

Community Employment is a very valuable resource and every effort is made to ensure opportunities for work experience and training are given to all unemployed persons in each area.

*Questions - Written Answers*  
**Rent Supplement Scheme**

98. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason the level of rent allowance payable was reduced following reassessment in the case of a person (details supplied); if the case will be reassessed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20963/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The purpose of Rent Supplement is to provide short-term income support to assist with the accommodation costs of eligible people living in private rented accommodation. It is subject to a means test and other eligibility criteria. Rent Supplement claims are also subject to ongoing reviews and payments may be affected if relevant information is not provided or if there is any change in circumstances.

The person concerned was awarded a weekly Rent Supplement payment of €293.10 with effect from 28/05/2020. Following the closure of her Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) on 15/02/2021, the Rent Supplement claim for the person concerned was re-assessed to €215.30 per week with effect from 13/03/2021. The rate of Rent Supplement entitlement was re-assessed on the basis of her average weekly income from employment and the Working Family Payment she receives from my Department. The person concerned was notified of the outcome of this review on 13/03/21 and was advised of her right to appeal the decision to the independent Chief Appeals Officer.

The person concerned was awarded an Illness Benefit payment this week. Following this award officials from my Department will contact the person concerned to carry out a further review of the rate of Rent Supplement in payment.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **State Pensions**

99. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Social Protection the position regarding a spouse who has worked on the family farm for all of their life equally with their husband but has not been credited with payments to allow them obtain an old age (contributory) pension; the circumstances in which a person who is not yet at pension age can arrange for payments in respect of contributions to be made for prior years at this stage; the circumstances in which this can be done; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20983/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Under 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 pension age (currently 66 years), and all self-employment contributions payable have been paid.

The Scope insurability section of my Department makes statutory decisions on the insurability of employment under the Social Welfare Acts. It deals with employers, employees and the self-employed, who may apply to have an employment or self-employment status investigated and the correct class of pay-related social insurance (PRSI) determined. Scope section also determines if a person is considered to have worked in a partnership. The person concerned should apply without delay to Scope section for a determination and provide any details necessary to assist with the determination.

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After the Scope decision is made, the person is notified as to whether a partnership exists and, if so, the years covered by the partnership. A bill for consequent self-employment liabilities is issued, and once settled, Class S contributions are updated to the person's contribution record. For State pension (contributory) qualification purposes, all self-employment contributions due should be paid prior to reaching pension age.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Carer's Allowance**

100. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a carer's allowance application by a person (details supplied) will be expedited given the urgency of the matter. [20989/21]

**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.

An application for CA was received in respect of the person concerned on 13 November 2020.

It is a condition for receipt of CA that that the person being cared for must have such disability that they require full-time care. The evidence submitted in support of this application was examined and the Deciding Officer (DO) decided this evidence did not indicate that requirement for full-time care was satisfied.

The applicant for CA in this case was notified on 6 January 2021 of the decision, the reason for it, and of her right of review and appeal.

A request for review of this decision was received on 28 January 2021. Following this review the decision has remained unchanged.

The applicant for CA in respect of the person concerned was notified on 6 February 2021 of this decision, the reason for it and of her right of appeal. To date no request for an appeal has been received.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Invalidity Pension**

101. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will request a full review of an application for invalidity pension which is at appeal stage in the name of a person (details supplied); and if an oral hearing will be arranged in order that they and their family can present their case. [20990/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I am advised by the Social Welfare Appeals Office that an Appeals Officer, having fully considered all the evidence, disallowed the appeal of the person concerned by way of summary decision on 14 January 2021.

Under social welfare legislation the decision of the Appeals Officer is final and conclusive and may only be reviewed by an Appeals Officer in the light of new evidence or new facts. I

am advised that the person concerned subsequently submitted additional evidence and that the Appeals Officer agreed to review the appeal decision on foot of this additional evidence. After due consideration the Appeals Officer did not find any new facts or evidence which warranted a revision of his earlier decision. The person concerned was notified of this outcome on 2 March 2021.

If there are new facts or evidence in relation to the application for invalidity pension that was not available at the time the decision on the appeal was made or at the time the decision was reviewed it may be referred to the Social Welfare Appeals Office to undertake a further review. An element of any such consideration will be whether it is necessary to hold an oral hearing on the matter.

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 on social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Gender Recognition**

102. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Social Protection when legislation will be introduced to enable 16 and 17 year olds to obtain a gender recognition certificate on their own, subject to parental approval, further to recommendations made in reports (details supplied); if there are plans to establish a less onerous approach for those under 18 years to acquire a gender recognition certificate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [21005/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Work was commenced in relation to advancing the legislative process in relation to gender recognition those aged 16 and 17 years and other relevant measures at the start of 2020. Since then, the ongoing devotion of resources within my 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 part of the Programme for Government.

I hope this clarifies these matters.

### **Free Travel Scheme**

103. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider establishing the free travel scheme as a standalone benefit as recommended by the Oireachtas Committee on Transport in 2018 (details supplied); the investigations which have been carried out on this matter to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [21010/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Free Travel scheme provides free travel on the main public and private transport services for those eligible under the scheme. These include road, rail and ferry services provided by companies such as Bus Átha Cliath, Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann, as well as Luas and services provided by over 80 private transport operators. There are currently approximately 994,000 customers with direct eligibility. The estimated expenditure on free travel in 2021 is €95 million.

The objective of the Free Travel scheme is to ensure that older people and people with disabilities remain active within their community. The scheme was never intended as a targeted support for people with severe mobility issues.

If the Free Travel scheme was to be extended to all people who had a disability and/or significant health issues, regardless of whether they receive a qualifying payment, a medical assessment process would be required for all such applications, significantly changing the nature of the scheme. Any decision to change the eligibility criteria of the free travel scheme along such lines would have significant costs and require additional administrative processes to be put in place. Accordingly, it could only be considered in the context of overall budgetary negotiations.

Under the “Make Work Pay” Initiative people in receipt of a long term disability payment who move off the payment to get a job can retain their Free Travel entitlement for a period of five years.

Under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme, my Department may award a travel supplement, where the circumstances of the particular case so warrant. The supplement is intended to assist with ongoing or recurring travel costs that cannot be met from the client’s own resources and are deemed to be necessary. Every decision is based on consideration of the circumstances of the individual case, taking account of the nature and extent of the need and of the resources of the person concerned.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Transport Policy**

104. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Social Protection the way in which her Department and agencies under her remit encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [21059/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Department, as an employer within the wider civil service, makes the Cycle to Work Scheme available to its employees. There have been 588 Cycle to Work scheme take-ups since the start of 2018. 2020 showed an increased number of applications to the scheme compared to the previous two years.

2018	123
2019	153
2020	230
2021 (to date)	87

The Department’s HR Wellbeing Unit was established in 2020 and since then its policy in this area offers supports in terms of educational webinars and other initiatives in areas such as fitness, nutrition and motivation.

The Department recently launched a “DSP Step challenge” with the aim of getting staff active coming into Spring, with 830 staff participating. The Unit will continue to provide similar initiatives in the coming months to support staff wellbeing in keeping active, including initiatives to promote the cycle to work scheme, road safety and being visible on the road during the winter months.

### **Community Employment Schemes**

105. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Social Protection if consideration will be given to extending the period of training and upskilling of the present community employment participants for an additional 12 months in lieu of the year lost due to Covid-19 restrictions; if she will acknowledge that to carry through the ethos of the community employment schemes to train and upskill participants in their chosen occupation for a period of three years and have them fully prepared for the labour market on the satisfactory completion of their three-year training and upskilling period would not be fulfilled for the current participants if their contract is not extended; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [21484/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** Community Employment (CE) is an active labour market programme designed to provide eligible long-term unemployed people and other disadvantaged persons with an opportunity to engage in useful work within their communities on a temporary, fixed term basis.

In general CE placements for new entrants aged between 21 and 55 years are for 1 year. As the Deputy is aware, CE participants who are working towards a Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) major award can seek to extend their participation on CE by up to 2 years to enable them to reach the required standard of qualification. CE participants aged 55 years or older can remain on CE for 3 years and do not have to work towards a QQI major award. A number participants who are aged over 55 who commenced on the scheme before 2017 can stay on CE for six consecutive years. Therefore participants across the various age cohorts have considerable periods of time to complete the training and development aspects of CE. I agree that training and upskilling of participants is a very important component of CE schemes and is one I fully support.

As the Deputy is aware, my Department has continued to provide funding and support for CE schemes since the onset of the Covid-19 emergency in March 2020. Furthermore a number of CE schemes, which provide essential community services, were in a position to continue to deliver these services, while complying with public health restrictions in place at differing times over the past year.

During each period of Level-5 restrictions, CE participants, whose contracts were due to end during these restrictions, have had their contracts extended for the duration of these restrictions, as a minimum. In early March 2021, Minister Humphreys and I announced funding for a further CE contract extension for participants, up until 2nd July 2021. Over 7,000 CE and Tus participants will benefit from this latest contract extension, that applies to all participants whose contracts were due to finish since end-October 2020. These extensions also provide many participants with additional time to complete their training and work experience on CE.

It is important to note that when CE participants are eventually due to finish on their respective schemes after the 2nd July, their exit will be undertaken on a coordinated, phased basis over a number of months. This will support the ongoing delivery of services by schemes and will be coordinated with the recruitment of new participants to schemes.

Where a CE participant finishes up on their CE scheme without completing the training outlined in their Individual Learning Plan (ILP) and if unfortunately, they remain unemployed, they may continue their development through a range of training supports provided by my Department such as the Training Support Grant (TSG) and the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA). Department case officers will engage with former CE participants to discuss the available options.

Contract extension dates will continue to be monitored in line with Government public health restrictions in place over the coming months. At the same time, I need to ensure that CE places are available for the incoming cohort of long term unemployed, once we start to move beyond

the COVID public health restrictions.

The priority for my Department is to ensure that all employment and activation programmes have the best outcomes for participants. CE will continue to be made available to support those who are long term unemployed and furthest removed from the labour market, while maintaining the role of CE as an active labour market programme.

I am fully committed to the future of these programmes and will continue to support and improve the programmes for the benefit of the CE participants and the valuable contribution being made to local communities through the provision of services.

### **Local Employment Service**

106. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will address a series of matters (details supplied) in relation to the proposals to publicly tender on a cost bid model for local employment services and jobs clubs; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [21485/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As part of the July stimulus, the Government committed to increase resources dedicated to the delivery of employment services both within the Department's own Intreo service, and, in addition, to expand the coverage of the Local Employment Services to areas not currently covered by existing providers. My Department has already increased its own complement of employment service staff and now intends to issue a Request for Tender (RFT) to expand local employment service type provision into some geographical areas where a Local Employment Service does not currently exist. The specific lots will be detailed in the request for tender, when it is published.

The forthcoming RFT will primarily focus on the quality of services to be provided, while expanding the capacity of the Public Employment Service (PES). This RFT, which is required to comply with EU procurement rules, will have no impact on the contracts of existing providers in other areas and it is expected that the tender will prove attractive to local community-based organisations, including the Local Development Companies.

In practice, the current LES funding approach requires a level of scrutiny of day-to-day expenditure, which places an undue administrative burden on both the employment service provider and my Department. Such an approach diverts valuable resources away from supporting clients and as such does nothing to enhance employment outcomes for the long-term unemployed. Moving to a new multiannual funding approach, which pays for each jobseeker referred to the service, coupled with a strong emphasis on quality of service provision will provide greater flexibility to providers to support individuals who avail of their service.

My Department is investing more in our communities by expanding employment services across the State and providing more support and assistance to the long term unemployed. We are committed to delivering a high quality employment service across the State and we need to increase the capacity of the Public Employment Service now in order to meet the expected demand arising as a result of pandemic.

Separately, the current contracts for all contracted PES provision expire at the end of 2021, following a twelve-month extension to ensure continuity of services during Covid restrictions. My Department is now developing RFTs to ensure that sufficient high-quality employment services are procured in a manner that is compatible with EU and national procurement rules.

Organisations with strong experience in the delivery of similar services at a community and

local level will be in a strong position to respond to the RFTs when they issue.

### **Youth Services**

107. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if there is scope for additional funding to be allocated to an organisation (details supplied) to offset its difficulties due to Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21041/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The ongoing management of the organisation referred to by the Deputy is a matter for their Board, including the challenges being presented due to the recent Covid-19 restrictions.

My Department provides substantial funding to this organisation, which plays an important role in providing young people with opportunities for developmental experiences and informal learning. All of the youth funding provided by my Department has been maintained fully throughout the ongoing period of restrictions. In addition, I secured an increase in 2021 for youth services, including an increase for the organisation referred to by the Deputy. I have no plans to provide additional funding to this organisation.

My officials are in regular contact with youth sector representatives in relation to the impact of the pandemic and associated health restrictions. It is of importance that Exchequer funding to youth services nationally is protected and I am satisfied that Government has been able to continue to support them. My officials will continue to work closely with youth organisations and will actively monitor the situation. We very much appreciate the challenges COVID-19 has posed for them and continues to pose.

### **Childcare Services**

108. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the actions being taken to address the high costs of rent for small childcare providers particularly during Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20914/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) providers have a range of different arrangements for their premises. In 2019, 48% providers owned their premises, 38% leased their premises, 8% had no formal agreement and 6% had a licensing agreement.

Robust costs data was captured through the Independent Review of the Cost of Providing Quality ELC and SAC Services in Ireland. Data from this review shows that, on average, premises account for 8% of providers’ costs although this will clearly vary considerably depending on individual circumstances. In addition, payroll and other staff costs accounts for approximately 70% of providers’ costs and commercial rates accounted for 1% of costs, on average.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth provides funding to ELC and SAC providers through a number of strands including the Early Childhood Care and Education programme, the National Childcare Scheme, the Programme Support Payment, the Access and Inclusion Model and other funding schemes. Providers also have income from

parental fees.

Given that ELC and SAC providers, whether for-profit or not-for-profit, are private operators and make individual decisions about how to run their services, how best to balance of income from different sources, and managing costs are very varied.

Throughout the Covid-19 crisis, significant additional State funding has been directed towards providers in the ELC and SAC sector. Since summer 2020, the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) has been available to employers in the sector with an exemption from having to demonstrate a 30% drop in income which applies to other sectors. EWSS has been paid at enhanced rates since October 2020. Enhanced rate EWSS is estimated to cover on average 80% of payroll costs or 50% of running costs for services. Other supports provided to the sector from my Department since the onset of Covid-19 includes the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme, a Reopening Support Payment and a Covid-19 Capital Support Grant. In addition, there have been a range of whole-of-economy supports for eligible providers, including the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, the Restart Grant and the commercial rates waiver.

The Covid-19 policy response was significantly informed by the data collected through the independent review of costs. My Department plans to continue capturing costs data in order to maintain an up-to-date dataset. My Department is also leading a review of the funding model for ELC and SAC. An Expert Group is considering a range of evidence and is due to report by the end of the year.

Where services are experiencing financial difficulty related to the Covid-19 crisis or otherwise, sustainability funding is also available. Providers are advised to contact their local city or county childcare committee for further information and support.

### **Early Childhood Care and Education**

109. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if there are plans to provide funding for childcare providers to increase staff ratio in ECCE classes taking into account the needs of younger children in early education settings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20915/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The minimum required ratios of adults to children in early learning and care services in Ireland for full day care or part-time provision are: 1:3 for children under 1 year old; 1:5 for children aged between 1 and 2 years old; 1:6 for 2 year olds; and 1:8 for pre-school children aged between 3 and 6. For children in sessional (less than 3.5 hours) pre-school provision who are aged between 2 years 6 months and 6 years old, there is a minimum adult-child ratio of 1:11. This sessional minimum ratio of 1:11 applies to children participating in the Early Childcare Care and Education (ECCE) programme, for which the eligible age group is children between 2 year 8 months and 5 year 6 months. These adult-child ratios are among the lowest in Europe according to the most recent (2019) edition of the Eurydice / European Commission report on ‘Key Data on Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe’.

The introduction of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) in 2016 had a positive impact on adult-child ratios in many early learning and care settings, with the provision of funding to support additional assistance in response to the needs of children with disabilities within pre-school rooms. This funding can be used either to ensure a 1:8 ratio in a room where a child with a disability is taking part in the ECCE programme, or to recruit an additional staff member for a room with a child with a disability, thus improving the effective adult-child ratio in the pre-

school room.

Since AIM's inception in 2016, more than 10,900 approvals for additional assistance have been awarded as part of AIM, benefitting the children taking part in the ECCE programme in the rooms where this additional support has been provided.

### Childcare Services

110. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the efforts he will take to address the high level of administrative duties for small childcare providers; if there are plans to streamline the administrative process for childcare providers, particularly smaller ones with less capacity to manage Departmental requirements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20916/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** I am aware that some providers of early learning and childcare services have expressed concerns about the administrative burden related to providing my Departments funded childcare programmes to families.

Since 2017 my Department has provided an annual programme supports payment (PSP) to all eligible childcare services, in recognition of the administrative work associated with the various Department funded schemes.

The PSP is based on the number of children registered in the service under each childcare programme and is usually paid in one instalment in July of each year. €19million was distributed to providers under the PSP in 2020.

As the Deputy may be aware, the early learning and childcare programmes funded by my Department are administered by Pobal.

Pobal has introduced a number of measures to improve the experience of childcare providers:

- a new user friendly on-line administration system, the Early Years Platform was introduced in 2019, and the administration of all childcare funding programmes is moving to this platform,

- 'how-to' guides have been produced for providers to help them to complete administrative tasks,

- additional resources have been assigned to the Pobal provider centre which offers expert advice to providers by phone or email.

In addition to support from Pobal, childcare providers can access support and advice on programme administration from the national network of County Childcare Committees which are funded by my Department. Details of each CCC can be found at [www.myccc.ie](http://www.myccc.ie).

### Childcare Services

111. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the position regarding AIM funding and the ongoing low pay for childcare staff on the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20917/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic**

**O’Gorman):** I am very conscious of the need for significant improvement in pay and working conditions for practitioners in early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC) services. The level of pay they receive does not reflect the value of the work they do for children, for families and for the wider society and economy. It also contributes to challenges in recruitment and retention of staff, which are key to the consistency of care provided to children.

As the State is not the employer, my Department does not set wage levels nor determine working conditions for staff working in the sector. The most recent published data indicates that the average hourly wage in the sector was €12.55 in mid-2019.

I recently wrote to the Minister of State for Business, Employment and Retail, recommending the establishment of a Joint Labour Committee for the sector, in line with the Programme for Government. If established, a Joint Labour Committee would provide an opportunity for relevant parties to engage in negotiations on an Employment Regulation Order, which could ultimately establish binding rates of pay and conditions for the sector. In addition, my Department has over a number of years provided a range of programmes and funding supports to service providers to support them to improve wages and working conditions.

One recent measure I took in this regard lies within the Access Inclusion Model (AIM), the objective of which is to help service providers to deliver an inclusive pre-school experience, ensuring that children with a disability can fully participate in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. In 2020 I was successful in increasing the AIM budget by €3.6 million. The majority of this additional allocation was used to increase the AIM Level 7 supports to providers from €195 per week to €210 per week, as from January 2021. This funding is provided to the pre-school provider and can be used either to reduce the adult-child ratio in the pre-school room or to buy in additional assistance.

## Transport Policy

112. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21046/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I wish to provide the following information to the Deputy regarding the ways that my Department and the bodies under the aegis of my Department encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work.

Body	Active Travel Measures
Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY)	DCEDIY provides support for same through the following measures:- Bike parking facilities in DCEDIY office buildings- Shower facilities for those cycling, walking or running to work- - articipation in the Cycle to Work scheme- Participation in the annual Travel-saver scheme for public transport- Details of the above are provided in DCEDIY employee induction programme
Child and Family Agency (Tusla)	Tusla will reply directly to the Deputy
Adoption Authority of Ireland (AAI)	The AAI advised that they do not have any particular active travel initiatives
Ombudsmanfor Children’s Office (OCO)	The OCO will reply directly to the Deputy

Body	Active Travel Measures
Children detention school (Oberstown)	With regard to the Children Detention School (Oberstown) the cycle to work scheme is widely promoted to staff as part of workplace incentives and supports. A number of staff have availed of the scheme and cycle to work on a daily basis. Also, as part of the Campus Support Services, Oberstown run incentives to encourage staff to become active. Such activities include “Work Healthy - All things health and wellbeing”, and a focus on exercise, diet and hobbies. The Campus also run monthly workplace initiatives, the most recent of which was last month when they ran “The Marchathon” step challenge, where teams on campus competed in a step challenge during the month of March.
Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC)	IHREC will reply directly to the Deputy
National Disability Authority	The NDA provides support for same through the following measures:- Bike parking facilities to the rear of the premises- Shower facilities for those cycling, walking or running to work- Participation in the Cycle to Work scheme- Participation in the annual Travel-saver scheme for public transport

### Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

113. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on providing financial support for students returning from Erasmus who have to mandatorily quarantine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20876/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Ireland is designated as a programme country under the Erasmus+ programme. As a programme country, Ireland is eligible to participate in all actions of the programme and has benefitted significantly from our participation.

The policy of my Department, as national authority for the programme, has always been to strongly encourage participation in Erasmus+ . The Department as national authority, has agreed to cover the cost of mandatory hotel quarantine for Erasmus+ participants at all levels who are returning to Ireland from countries on the quarantine list.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

114. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the costs of mandatory hotel quarantine will be waived for students returning from a graduate internship programme similar to that being proposed for Erasmus students; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20911/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The decision to support Erasmus+ participants with mandatory hotel quarantine was taken in the specific context of the Erasmus programme, for which my Department is the national authority.

Ireland is designated as a programme country under the Erasmus+ programme. As part of the programme, each programme country must nominate a national authority to monitor and supervise the management of the programme at national level. Ireland’s nominated Erasmus+ national authority is based in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

As national authority, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has designated the Higher Education Authority (HEA), as national agency for Erasmus+ in the field of higher education. As the national agency, the HEA is responsible for the participation of the higher education sector. The national authority provides co-funding for

the operational costs to the European Programmes Unit of the HEA.

The policy of the national authority has always been to strongly encourage participation in the Erasmus+ programme. On this basis, the Department as national authority, has agreed to cover the cost of mandatory hotel quarantine for Erasmus+ participants at all levels who are returning to Ireland from countries on the quarantine list. We are not in a position to extend this support beyond the Erasmus+ programme.

### **Departmental Funding**

115. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the percentage of the overall funding for his Department that has been ring-fenced for the implementation of the Framework for Consent in Higher Education Institutions: Safe, Respectful, Supportive and Positive – Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish Higher Education Institutions; and the breakdown of same. [21003/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Our higher education institutions have a duty of care to their students and staff, and a responsibility to foster a campus culture that is clear in the condemnation of unwanted and unacceptable behaviours, which act as barriers to their safety and their active participation in college life.

In April 2019 the Framework for Consent in Higher Education Institutions: “Safe, Respectful, Supportive and Positive – Ending Sexual Violence and Harassment in Irish Higher Education Institutions” was launched by my Department.

To assist institutions with implementation of the Framework, funding of over €400,000 has been allocated by my Department to a number of initiatives since its launch. In addition, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) has allocated funding of over €500,000 towards consent workshops, the development of the anonymous report and support tool, and the UCC Bystander intervention programme. Prior to and since the launch of the Framework institutions would have undertaken activities in this area as part of their student services remit from within their overall funding allocations. I do not have data on overall institutional expenditure.

In August 2020 I wrote to all of the Presidents of the publicly funded higher education institutions, as I wanted to strengthen institutional action in this area. I requested the institutions to produce individual action plans on tackling sexual violence and harassment. The action plans have been received by the HEA, and institutions must also report annually on their progress in implementing the Framework.

In April 2021 I launched surveys into staff and student experiences of sexual violence and sexual harassment in our higher education institutions. The surveys, which are being conducted by the HEA, have been sent to all students and staff by their HEIs. A report on these surveys should be available to my Department in a number of months.

I want to see our higher education institutions embed the Framework for Consent into their policies and procedures, so as to ensure their long-lasting impact, which will see Ireland take a leading role in ending sexual violence and harassment. This is a priority for my Department and we will be closely following progress in this area.

### **Third Level Institutions**

116. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he has engaged with DCU on the complaints made by the embassies of Georgia and Ukraine regarding their teaching of a course on the geopolitics of the Caucasus and Ukraine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21028/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The position is that universities are autonomous bodies within the meaning of the Universities Act 1997, and the management of their academic affairs, including the delivery of courses are matters for the individual institutions. The institutions' governance and their day-to-day management are matters for which the Governing Bodies and the management of the relevant institutions are responsible.

It would not be appropriate therefore for me to engage in these matters. Academic freedom is a cornerstone of our higher education sector.

### **Transport Policy**

117. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21053/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I can confirm to the Deputy that my Department has a number of initiatives in place to encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work. Such initiatives include:

#### **Cycle-to-work scheme:**

The Cycle-to-work scheme (generally known as the Bike to Work Scheme) is a tax incentive scheme to encourage staff to cycle to work and is in operation in my Department since 2009.

#### **Travel pass scheme:**

The travel pass scheme for public transport is also available to Department staff. The Scheme allows staff to purchase an annual travel pass for bus, dart, train or luas by tax free salary deductions.

#### **Business travel policy:**

My Department's policy in relation to the claiming of travel and subsistence expenses specifies that all travel should be by the shortest practicable routes and by the cheapest practicable mode of transport. Officers are encouraged to use public transport whenever practicable, with private transport to be used only in limited circumstances.

In addition, my Department promotes the annual European Mobility week which each year focuses on a particular topic related to Sustainable Mobility. The Department also supports the 'car free day' by encouraging staff who regularly drive to leave their cars at home.

The information in respect of state bodies, within the scope of the Deputy's question, is not held by my Department. Contact details for these bodies are set out in the attached document should the Deputy wish to contact them directly with this query.

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.

### Garda Stations

118. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Justice if she will provide a report on the official reopening and manning of the refurbished Rush Garda station; the timeline for same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20919/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Deputy will be aware that the Office of Public Works (OPW) has responsibility for the provision and maintenance of Garda accommodation. Works in relation to Garda accommodation are therefore progressed by the Garda authorities working in close cooperation with the OPW.

The works required to reopen Rush Garda station have been completed and the building has been handed over by the OPW to the Garda authorities.

I am advised by the Garda authorities that Rush Garda Station is currently being used for operational activities. A limited public counter service is due to commence in the Station in the near future, though the exact date is yet to be finalised.

As at 31 March 2021, there were 8 Gardaí assigned to Rush Garda station.

I am further advised that community policing services for the Rush area have and will continue to be provided from Lusk Garda Station.

### Oireachtas Joint Committee Reports

119. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Justice further to Parliamentary Question No. 751 of 28 July 2020, if the recommendations of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice and Equality report on reform of the family law system have been given further consideration; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [21043/21]

120. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Justice if she has given further consideration to the implementation of recommendations 9, 11 and 36 of the Report of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice and Equality on Reform of the Family Law System; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [21044/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 119 and 120 together.

The Deputy will be aware that the Family Justice Oversight Group established by my Department in September has as its aim the development of a high level vision for the future of family justice in Ireland. The work of the group is complemented by the recommendations in the report of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice and Equality on reform of the family law system. These recommendations are being taken into account by the group with the ultimate aim of agreeing a strategy for a modernised family justice system, in parallel with the enactment of the forthcoming Family Court Bill.

As part of its work, the Group is currently engaged in a consultation process whereby relevant stakeholders and all who engage with the family justice system, including children, will have an opportunity to inform the Group's work. I expect to announce details of the public consultation element of this process shortly.

Parallel to this, the General Scheme of the Family Court Bill provides for the establishment of a District Family Court, a Circuit Family Court and a Family High Court as divisions within the existing court structures. It is proposed that judges will be appointed on a full-time basis to both the District Family Court and the Circuit Family Court for renewable terms of 3 years.

With regard to the specific recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee referred to by the Deputy, one of the areas being considered by the Group is additional training for those working within the family justice system that would benefit all those who engage with the system. As part of the General Scheme of the Family Court Bill, specialist knowledge and ongoing professional training in the area of family law would be required to be appointed as a Family Court judge.

I have noted the Committee's recommendation on the topic of parental alienation and my Department will shortly be undertaking some research on this. The outcome of that research will inform future decisions on whether any additional policy or legislative measures are considered appropriate in this area.

### **Transport Policy**

121. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice the way in which her Department and agencies under her remit encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [21056/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** My Department and the agencies under its remit encourages and facilitates employees to use active travel to commute to work.

Employees are encouraged to avail of the Cycle to Work Scheme and in 2020, 88 staff of the Department purchased bicycles under the scheme to support their commute to work. The Department, as part of its Wellness Programme has both a running and walking club. Pre-pandemic, with the support of the Department and their colleagues many of the club members incorporated walking and running in to their journey to and from work. As many of the Department's staff are currently working from home the Department continued, through its Wellness Programme to encourage staff to stay active for both their physical and mental wellbeing. Again, the running and walking clubs supported and encouraged activity with both running and step challenges, many of which had the added benefit of raising funds for charity.

## Legal Aid Service

122. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Justice the way in which she is guaranteeing the independence of her review into the use of public defenders as per a commitment to an independent review of the area within the Programme for Government (details supplied). [21063/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy is aware, the agreed 2020 Programme for Government includes a commitment to “independently examine the option of a dedicated system of public defenders”.

The development of an evidence based analysis of the costs and benefits associated with the policy choices for introducing a Public Defender System, not only in terms of the direct and indirect financial costs of establishment, but also taking account of the possible economic impacts of such a model on the wider system, will help to inform, identify and develop the objective for introducing any potential changes to the existing system.

The current position is that an initial scoping paper on this matter has been developed within my Department, setting out options for how the process will be conducted. The next step is to develop the Terms of Reference for the review, taking into account international best practice and equality of arms between prosecution and defence, and that process is underway.

## Proposed Legislation

123. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the date to which his Department is working towards to introduce the nursing home support scheme (amendment) Bill to the Houses of the Oireachtas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20872/21]

**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

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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, the Programme for Government commits to introducing this amendment to the Nursing Home Support Scheme and work on the legislation has continued to progress. Officials in my Department and draftspeople in the Office of the Attorney General have been working intensively on drafting this legislation for several months, and I am pleased to say that a finalised draft of the Bill has now been signed by the Attorney General. I am sure you will appreciate that several steps must be completed before the Bill is laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas, including its approval by Government. I expect to bring the Bill to Cabinet for approval in the next couple of weeks. It will be published very shortly thereafter and presented to both Houses of the Oireachtas at the earliest possible opportunity.

### **Long-Term Illness Scheme**

124. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the status of the cross-Departmental report on Prader-Willi syndrome; when it is expected that the report will be published; the reason for the delay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20873/21]

**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.

I met with representatives of the Prader-Willi Syndrome Association of Ireland (PWSAI) on the 4th February this year and I must say that the Prader-Willi syndrome Report is very much welcomed and a reflection of the commitment of PWSAI.

It was proposed to enlist the wider support of other stakeholders in conjunction with the Health Service Executive (HSE) to formulate an implementation plan.

I am informed by the HSE that this process is being undertaken with a view to publishing the report, and establishing a working group to develop a model of integrated clinical care that will take into account the specific healthcare recommendations of this report.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## Medicinal Products

125. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the progress in making a gene therapy (details supplied) available and publicly funded for persons diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20874/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drugs schemes, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

In line with the 2013 Health Act and the national framework agreed with industry, if a company would like a medicine to be reimbursed by the HSE, the company must submit an application to the HSE to have the 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).

I am advised by the HSE that, in April 2020, the NCPE received a reimbursement application dossier for Onasemnogene abeparvovec (Zolgensma). On 13 May 2020, the NCPE completed a rapid review with respect to this application and recommended a full Health Technology Assessment (HTA) to assess the clinical effectiveness and cost effectiveness of Zolgensma compared with the current standard of care.

This HTA is now being undertaken as a part of the Beneluxa collaboration as a joint HTA between Ireland, the Netherlands and Belgium, with Austria acting as a reviewer.

The assessment, due to be concluded in April 2021, will be followed by further discussions among the participating countries regarding pricing and reimbursement.

## Covid-19 Pandemic

126. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the way the appeals system for those in mandatory quarantining operates; the grounds on which appeals can be made; the time scale involved; the number of persons who have appealed their mandatory quarantining; the outcomes of those appeals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20875/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health Act 1947, as amended, provides that all persons arriving in Ireland from a designated state, or having travelled through a designated state in the previous 14 days, are required to undergo mandatory quarantine in a designated facility unless they are an exempted traveller under the Act. All applicable travellers must reserve and pay for a place in mandatory hotel quarantine.

The Act allows for travellers to request a review of decisions relating to their quarantine (independent appeals process); however this can only be undertaken once quarantine has begun and on a limited number of grounds. Public health will remain a paramount consideration.

The Department of Justice is supporting the Department of Health in relation to the review process and has put in place a process which provides a seven day a week service.

Decisions must be returned within 24 hours of receipt of the request for review. Requests for review are based on the specific grounds established in the law. Appeals officers have been selected from a group of barristers who have also provided a service in relation to the International Protection Appeals Tribunal. There are currently 35 appeals officers to ensure they are completed within the 24 hour timeframe.

As of 20th April, there have been 478 appeals. 44 appeals have been granted, 433 appeals have been refused and 1 appeal pending.

### **Medical Aids and Appliances**

127. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if funding for equipment will be provided for a child (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20880/21]

**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**

128. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Health if he has sought advice from the Chief Medical Officer or NPHEP regarding the position of fully vaccinated persons and mandatory hotel quarantine; if so, if the advice will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20883/21]

129. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Health the details of the criteria applied in respect of obliging persons travelling to Ireland from particular countries both EU and non-EU to undergo mandatory hotel quarantine. [20887/21]

135. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Health the categories of exemptions and exceptions for mandatory hotel quarantine for persons travelling to Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20898/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 128, 129 and 135 together.

Mandatory hotel quarantine has been introduced as one element of Ireland's public health measures to combat the transmission of COVID-19 variants of concern.

The Health Act 1947, as amended, provides that all persons arriving in Ireland from a designated state, or having travelled through a designated state in the previous 14 days, are required to undergo mandatory quarantine in a designated facility unless they are an exempted traveller under the Act. All applicable travellers must reserve and pay for a place in mandatory hotel quarantine.

Mandatory hotel quarantine is also necessary in circumstances where passengers coming from non-designated states do not provide evidence that they have a negative or 'not detected' result from a COVID-19 Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) test carried out no more than 72 hours before arrival into Ireland.

The Act identifies those who are exempt from mandatory hotel quarantine;

- arriving into the State in the course of duty and who hold a valid Annex 3 certificate (ensuring the availability of goods and essential services)

- arriving in the State in the course of duty and are drivers of a heavy goods vehicle

- airline pilots, aircrew, maritime master or maritime crew and who arrive in the State in the course of performing duties

- travelling to the State pursuant to an arrest warrant, extradition proceedings or other mandatory legal obligation

- a member of An Garda Síochána or Defence Forces (or their equivalents from another state) and travelling to the State in course of duty

- travelling to the State for unavoidable, imperative and time-sensitive medical reasons and these reasons are certified by a registered medical practitioner or person with equivalent qualifications outside the State

- having been outside of the State to provide services to or perform the functions of an office holder (under any enactment or the Constitution) or a member of either house of the Oireachtas or the European Parliament

- diplomats and certain other categories of persons entitled to privileges and immunities in the State

Regulations also exempt transit passengers who do not leave the port or airport before travelling out of the State and who have a 'not detected' COVID-19 PCR test result, following a test taken within 72 hours of their arrival into Ireland.

The Government continues to evaluate wider policy on international travel as informed by the epidemiological situation and public health advice.

In this context, Regulations have been introduced to exempt limited categories of persons from Mandatory Hotel Quarantine;

- Fully vaccinated persons arriving from designated states are exempt from Mandatory Hotel Quarantine. This only applies to persons who are fully vaccinated with an EMA-approved vaccine. Travellers must have a negative pre-departure PCR test and complete a period of self-quarantine at home or wherever specified the passenger locator form.

- All families travelling with new-born babies (no more than 28 days old), including those who have travelled to a designated state for the purpose of surrogacy, do not have to complete mandatory hotel quarantine. Travellers must have a negative pre-departure PCR test and complete a period of self-quarantine at home or wherever specified the passenger locator form.

- Elite athletes, whose attendance is necessary for the running of a high-level sporting event. These people are still required to quarantine at home, except for the time necessary to attend the sporting event. This step allows for the safe continuation of high-level sports while also protecting against spread of COVID-19.

The provisions of the Act allow for travellers to request a review of decisions relating to their quarantine; however, this can only be undertaken once quarantine has begun. Requests for review can be based only on a limited number of grounds and public health will remain a paramount consideration. The SLO (Irish Defence Forces) in the hotel can provide further

information on how to apply.

It is important to note that the list of designated states will be subject to change at short notice and passengers are required to check the list before travelling to Ireland, to be sure of their obligations.

Further information on exemptions can be accessed on [www.gov.ie/quarantine](http://www.gov.ie/quarantine).

### Vaccination Programme

130. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if an alternative vaccine will be immediately provided to those in the 60-69 years of age cohort who are not recommended to take a vaccine (details supplied) due to past medical history; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20892/21]

133. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health the vaccination option available to persons aged 60-69 who have been advised by their general practitioner not to take a vaccine (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20895/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 130 and 133 together.

On 7 April 2021, the European Medicine Agency (EMA) announced that they had concluded an investigation into a number of very rare, unusual blood clots occurring with low platelets in people following vaccination with Vaxzevria (formerly COVID-19 Vaccine AstraZeneca). The EMA's safety committee (PRAC) concluded that unusual blood clots with low blood platelets should be listed as very rare side effects of Vaxzevria/AstraZeneca but that the benefits of this vaccine continue to outweigh the risks.

The National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) announced revisions to the recommendations for the use of Vaxzevria/AstraZeneca. In line with these recommendations,

- All of those aged 60 years and older can get any authorised COVID-19 vaccine, including Vaxzevria/AstraZeneca;

- Vaxzevria/AstraZeneca is not recommended for those aged under 60 years including those with medical conditions with very high or high risk of severe COVID-19 disease;

**- For people who have already received Vaxzevria/AstraZeneca:**

- Those aged 60 years and older should continue to receive their second dose 12 weeks later as scheduled,

- Those aged under 60 years with an underlying condition (those identified in cohort 4 and cohort 7) should continue to receive their second dose 12 weeks later as scheduled,

- Those aged under 60 years with no underlying condition (therefore not identified in cohort 4 and cohort 7) should have the scheduled interval between their first and second doses extended to 16 weeks to allow for further assessment of the benefits and risks as more evidence becomes available,

- Those who have developed unusual blood clots with low platelets after the first dose of Vaxzevria/AstraZeneca should not be given a second dose.

The Department of Health will continue to monitor the roll-out of Vaxzevria/AstraZeneca

in Ireland and internationally in collaboration with the HPRA and the NIAC. The Department of Health, the HSE and the High-Level Taskforce will now work together to ensure that these updated recommendations are incorporated into the ongoing implementation of the vaccination programme.

### **Vaccination Programme**

131. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if he will advise on a matter raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20893/21]

**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.

### **Public Sector Pensions**

132. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if a matter in relation to a HSE pension will be addressed for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20894/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

*Question No. 133 answered with Question No. 130.*

### **Vaccination Programme**

134. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if a series of matters (details supplied) will be taken into account when issuing appointments for vaccinations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20896/21]

**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. 135 answered with Question No. 128.*

### **Disability Services Provision**

136. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health the contingency plans put in place with respect to the withdrawal of an organisation (details supplied) and the setting of a transition deadline for the services provided by a facility. [20903/21]

**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.

## **Disability Services Provision**

137. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the plans for and status of a service (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20904/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** Almost ten years ago, the Time to Move on from Congregated Settings Report identified approximately 4,000 people with disabilities living in congregated type settings. The 2011 Report expected that decongregation could happen at a much faster pace than was actually possible.

Since 2014, the Transforming Lives Programme provides the framework for implementation and for putting policy into practice across key reports, including Time to Move on from Congregated Settings in respect of residential centres,

Today less than 2,000 people live in congregated settings.

The Programme for Government – ‘Our Shared Future’ includes a commitment to continue with moving people out of old style congregated settings, into new homes within the community, with the necessary supports.

Today, people are being supported to live lives of their choice out in the community. Several congregated settings have closed fully and many more have closed specific units within the centres.

Thoughtful planning, capacity building work with stakeholders and sharing the learning across services is enabling meaningful person-centred planning and transitions that are sustainable.

While the pace of change has been slow in some services, there is momentum and progress is being made.

Budget 2021 provides for an unprecedented level of investment in disability services, with the investment of €100m for new initiatives in 2021. The increased level of funding in 2021 will enable us to build on initiatives currently underway, including the decongregation programme, with a renewed focus on assisting people to move out of congregated settings to homes in the community. The HSE has prioritised the transition of a further 144 people from congregated settings in 2021 under its Service Plan.

As the numbers in the large settings continues to fall, the people still remaining in these services have access to better living conditions and share with fewer people

As the specific question raised is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## **Addiction Treatment Services**

138. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health when a new health service will be established in counties Cavan and Monaghan (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20926/21]

**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.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

139. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health if there are pregnant women ill with Covid-19 who are currently on life-support or other critical care in a hospital either for their own care and or in order to advance their pregnancies to safe delivery of their babies; if so, the number of women affected from the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic to date; the strains of Covid-19 involved; the number of hospitals involved in care and transfer, both maternity and general; the location of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20930/21]

**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**

140. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a primary medical care certificate application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20932/21]

**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) Community Medical Doctors in the Scheme relates to making a 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.

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 HSE to recommence assessments from 1st January, 2021.

The ability to hold assessments has been impacted by, among other things, the public health restrictions in place to suppress and manage the spread of COVID-19. Unfortunately there are delays in the processing of assessments due to the involvement of the HSE Medical Doctors in the national COVID-19 response, which I know are causing undue strain on applicants.

I recently met again with the HSE to discuss the issues around the delay in accessing Primary Medical Certificate assessments. The HSE has confirmed that the assessment process has recommenced and it is continuing to monitor the situation in the context of resuming the range of services that are provided by Community Medical Doctors under the HSE Service Recovery and Restoration Plan, taking into account the pressures and challenges to the health services presented by COVID.

As the query raised by the Deputy relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the HSE for consideration and direct reply to the Deputy.

## **Vaccination Programme**

141. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health the estimated number within each vaccine prioritisation group of those who have received two doses, those who have received one dose and those yet to be reached for the most recent date for which estimates are available. [20934/21]

**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**

142. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health if new information or clinical presentations are emerging here suggesting that pregnancy does or could put women at particular or greater risk of serious complications or severe illness from Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20951/21]

**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**

143. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if he has evaluated all available evidence for prioritisation of pregnant women on the vaccine priority list; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20957/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Pregnant women are at a similar risk to non-pregnant women of contracting COVID-19 disease. Most pregnant women who are infected with COVID-19 will experience mild to moderate symptoms, and the risk of passing COVID-19 virus to the baby is low.

However, pregnant women who become ill from COVID-19 are more likely to be admitted to hospital, to need care in an ICU, and to die when compared with non-pregnant women patients.

Women from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds may be more likely than other pregnant women to be admitted to hospital with COVID-19 disease.

Pregnant women who are healthcare workers or who have medical conditions which put them at high risk of severe disease are included in the respective priority groups. The priority for other pregnant women will be determined when more evidence is available.

It is important to emphasise that vaccination is only one part of our response to the prevention of COVID-19 infection. People who are vaccinated need to continue with all the public health measures that have been proven to reduce the risk of infection, i.e., limiting our social contacts, physical distancing, wearing a mask, hand hygiene, cough etiquette and avoiding non-essential travel until a sufficiently large proportion of the population are immune.

### **Medicinal Products**

144. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health the reimbursement status of patisiran; when it will be next discussed by the HSE drugs group; and if he will make a state-

ment on the matter. [20959/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drugs schemes, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

In line with the 2013 Health Act and the national framework agreed with industry, a company must submit an application to the HSE to have a new medicine added to the reimbursement list.

Reimbursement is for licenced indications which have been granted market authorisation by the European Medicines Agency or the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the taxpayer are made on objective, scientific and economic grounds, on the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics (NCPE).

The HSE has advised that it received an application in December 2018 for the reimbursement of Patisiran (Onpattro) for the treatment of hereditary transthyretin-mediated amyloidosis (hATTR amyloidosis) in adult patients with stage 1 or stage 2 polyneuropathy.

In January 2019, a full health technology assessment (HTA) with respect to this indication was commissioned by the HSE. This assessment was completed in February 2020, with the NCPE recommending that Patisiran not be considered for reimbursement unless cost-effectiveness could be improved relative to existing treatments.

The HTA report with respect to Patisiran was reviewed by the HSE Drugs Group in July 2020, along with the outputs of commercial discussions with the applicant which took place in May 2020, and the patient group submission received during the HTA process.

The HSE Drugs Group requested patient and clinician input via the Rare Diseases Technology Review Committee (RDTRC) to assist the group in making its recommendation to the HSE Executive Management Team (EMT) regarding reimbursement of Patisiran.

The RDTRC convened on 24 September and reviewed the clinical data previously submitted as part of the established pricing and reimbursement process. The Committee also heard from Consultants involved in the specialist management of patients with hATTR amyloidosis.

The RDTRC continued its review of Patisiran at its subsequent meeting on 5 November which included patient input on the impact of hATTR amyloidosis.

Following these meetings, the Committee finalised a statement summarising the clinician and patient engagement on Patisiran which was received by the HSE Drugs Group on 26 November.

The HSE has advised that it met with the applicant company in December 2020 and in early January 2021 for further discussions and deliberations on the pricing position.

At its January 2021 meeting, the HSE Drugs Group reviewed all the relevant documentation concerning the application, including information provided by the RDTRC. The HSE has advised that, having considered all of the criteria of which is obliged to take account, the HSE Drugs Group was unable to recommend in favour of reimbursement.

The decision-making authority in the HSE is the HSE Executive Management Team (EMT). The HSE EMT decides on the basis of all the demands with which it is faced (across all services) whether it can fund a new medicine, or new uses of an existing medicine, from the

resources that have been provided to it in line with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

The HSE has confirmed that it issued notice to the applicant company of the proposed decision of the EMT not to support reimbursement of Patisiran in February 2021.

Where the HSE EMT team has considered a recommendation of non-reimbursement from the HSE Drugs Group and proposes to accept such a recommendation, the HSE is legally required (in line with the 2013 Health Act) to set out in detail a notice of any proposed decision to an applicant company. The HSE is also legally required in such circumstances to provide at least a 28-day period (from the formal written notice of proposal) to enable an applicant company to consider the proposal not to reimburse and to make representations to the HSE. The HSE is legally required to consider any such representations in advance of a formal decision.

The HSE advises that the applicant company submitted representations on 5 March and 12 March, in response to the EMT's proposed decision. The application for Patisiran and the applicant's representations are to be included on the agenda for the HSE Drugs Group's May 2021 meeting, with a view to making a recommendation to the HSE EMT on the basis of all of the available evidence, in line with the 2013 Health Act.

The application for the reimbursement of Patisiran remains under consideration with the HSE. As decision-making authority, the HSE EMT will, following receipt of the outcome of the HSE Drugs Group's deliberations, make a decision on whether Patisiran will be reimbursed.

### **Addiction Treatment Services**

145. **Deputy Dessie Ellis** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the detox ten-bed unit in St. Michael's Ward, Beaumont Hospital is currently closed; the status of the unit; when it will reopen as a detox unit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20961/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Beaumont Hospital advises that St. Michael's Ward is temporarily being used as a Covid-19 vaccination centre. It is envisaged that it will revert to its previous designation by the end of June 2021.

### **Dental Services**

146. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the treatments available to a person (details supplied) for dental work. [20965/21]

**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**

147. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the treatments available to a person (details supplied) who requires dental surgery due to medication outside of the medical card limits. [20966/21]

**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**

148. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will be afforded respite as a matter of urgency. [20967/21]

**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.

### **Hospital Groups**

149. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 1158 of 31 March 2021, if he will seek an appropriate response that answers the questions asked; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20969/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I note the issues raised by the Deputy and have asked the HSE to review the reply issued on April 16th by RCSI Hospital Group with a view to providing a detailed response

### **Vaccination Programme**

150. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Health when persons in their 60s and 70s who refuse a vaccine (details supplied) due to concerns regarding the possibility of a negative health impact will be able to be vaccinated. [20970/21]

**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**

151. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied) regarding mandatory hotel quarantine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20975/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Mandatory hotel quarantine has been introduced as one element of Ireland's public health measures to combat the transmission of COVID-19 variants of concern.

The Health Act 1947, as amended, provides that all persons arriving in Ireland from a designated state, or having travelled through a designated state in the previous 14 days, are required to undergo mandatory quarantine in a designated facility unless they are an exempted traveller under the Act. All applicable travellers must reserve and pay for a place in mandatory hotel

quarantine.

Mandatory hotel quarantine is also necessary in circumstances where passengers coming from non-designated states do not provide evidence that they have a negative or 'not detected' result from a COVID-19 Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) test carried out no more than 72 hours before arrival into Ireland.

Unaccompanied minors who have travelled from or through a designated state in the 14 days prior to arrival in Ireland will not be permitted to enter a mandatory quarantine facility alone. To board a flight/ferry to Ireland, an unaccompanied minor must produce a negative RT-PCR test within the last 72 hours and their passport.

Their adult guardian can enter mandatory hotel quarantine with them, however, if this is not possible a responsible adult collecting the unaccompanied minor must sign a guardian release letter undertaking in writing the legal responsibility for ensuring that, the unaccompanied minor, will complete the mandatory 14 day quarantine at a specified address and that it is possible to effectively isolate at the said address.

In instances where an unaccompanied minor is arriving in Ireland to attend boarding school, a school representative must present themselves to Irish Immigration authorities with proper identification and on arrival, they will fill in, sign and return the Guardian Release Letter to the Irish immigration official. It is a criminal offence to give misleading or fraudulent information to an Irish immigration official.

Further information including the list of designated states can be accessed on [www.gov.ie/quarantine](http://www.gov.ie/quarantine).

The Government continues to advise against all non-essential international travel.

### **General Practitioner Services**

152. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health his plans to reinstate a general practitioner service at Enfield Health Centre, Enfield, County Meath given that there are no general practitioners in the town; the length of time it will take to find a general practitioner; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20980/21]

**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.

### **Care of the Elderly**

153. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the steps being taken to ensure the safe reopening of day care centres for the elderly; the timeline for the reopening of these centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20985/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** It has been a key priority for the HSE to ensure that the focus on resuming Day Care Services for Older People can occur as soon as it is safe to do so. It is acknowledged that the Day Care Services provided across the country are a fundamental support structure for older people. Day Care Services have been closed since March 2020. The HSE has advised the Department that additional supports including home support, meals on wheels, telephone support, additional public health nursing, virtual activities etc. have been provided for most vulnerable clients during this pe-

riod. In addition, the Alzheimer's Association of Ireland have been providing 'Day Care in the Home' across the country for clients with Dementia.

Since November 2020, a Day Care Focus Group Office has been in place with representation from across the HSE and voluntary organisations to put in place a plan for the reopening of Day Care Services for Older People in line with the COVID roadmap. The Group has met on 6 occasions with the focus on putting in place guidance and plans for the resumption of Day Care Services, as soon as possible. The group was originally concentrating on what services could be delivered under current guidance and in line with the current COVID Roadmap and have now extended their approach based on the COVID vaccination programme and the impact this can provide on how services can re-open.

As a result of the vaccination programme currently being rolled out to persons over 70 years of age, further guidance has been sought from Public Health in relation to the provision of Day Care Services and how these can be operated safely and in line with the measures in place to ease restrictions over the next few months.

Day Care Service been also been asked to assess what can currently be delivered and requirements to reopen. A sub-group has also been established to develop an individualised Risk Assessment that can be carried out in respect of clients returning to the services. It will not be feasible at present under Level 5 restrictions and current guidance in place to deliver a service in a congregated setting but plans will be put in place in conjunction with Public Health advice by each service in relation to the resumption of services so that Day Care Services can resume as soon as it is considered safe to provide the service.

Areas to be focused on will include:-

- Safe transport
- Protection of carers who have not been vaccinated and the impact of this.
- Identification of clients who are safe to return to Day Care Services.
- Supports for clients who will not be in a position to return to Day Care Services.

The HSE has reassured the Department that it will continue to focus on the re-opening of Day Care Services as a priority and the Focus Group in place will continue to drive a plan to resume these services as soon as possible. The Focus Group are due to meet again on 28th April 2021 and the HSE work will continue to work with services to ensure that as many services as possible can re-open as soon as it is safe to operate within a congregated setting.

It is a priority for me as Minister with special responsibility for older people for day services to resume as soon as possible and I continue to engage with senior officials within the Department and HSE on this very important matter.

### **Vaccination Programme**

154. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the updated advice for pregnant women to receive the Covid-19 vaccination (details supplied). [20986/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The committee's recommendations are based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practice in relation to immunisation. It makes recommendations on vac-

cination policy to my Department. The NIAC review all data relating to COVID-19 vaccines on a rolling basis.

Pregnant women are at a similar risk to non-pregnant women of contracting COVID-19 disease. Most pregnant women who are infected with COVID-19 will experience mild to moderate symptoms, and the risk of passing COVID-19 virus to the baby is low.

However, pregnant women who become ill from COVID-19 are more likely to be admitted to hospital, to need care in an ICU, and to die when compared with non-pregnant women patients. Women from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds may be more likely than other pregnant women to be admitted to hospital with COVID-19 disease.

Pregnant women who are healthcare workers or who have medical conditions which put them at high risk of severe disease are included in the respective priority groups. The priority for other pregnant women will be determined when more evidence is available.

Pregnant women who are between 14 weeks and 36 weeks of gestation may receive COVID-19 mRNA vaccines. Pregnant women who meet the priority criteria for vaccination and their obstetric caregivers should engage in shared decision-making in advance of vaccination. Counselling should balance available data on vaccine safety, risks to pregnant women from SARS-CoV-2 infection, and a woman's individual risk for infection and severe disease. Where the risk/benefit is favourable, the two doses should be given 28 days apart. The two dose schedule should be given between 14 and 36 completed weeks of gestation.

It is important to emphasise that vaccination is only one part of our response to the prevention of COVID-19 infection. People who are vaccinated need to continue with all the public health measures that have been proven to reduce the risk of infection, i.e., limiting our social contacts, physical distancing, wearing a mask, hand hygiene, cough etiquette and avoiding non-essential travel until a sufficiently large proportion of the population are immune.

### **Alcohol Pricing**

155. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the progress made in the past three months in relation to introducing minimum unit pricing for alcohol as provided for in legislation; the steps that have to be taken before this section of legislation can be commenced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20988/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The introduction of minimum unit pricing of alcohol products is currently subject to a Government Decision which envisaged that it would be introduced in Northern Ireland and in the Republic simultaneously.

Northern Ireland Health Minister Robin Swann recently set out that he and his Department do not have capacity to implement minimum unit pricing in Northern Ireland during his mandate. On that basis I intend to explore alternative approaches to the introduction here of this very important public health measure.

### **Vaccination Programme**

156. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health when those who act as community first responders in their local communities will be prioritised for the Covid-19 vaccination. [20995/21]

**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.

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.

On the 30th of March, the Government approved a further update to the COVID-19 Vaccination Allocation Strategy. Based on clinical, scientific and ethical frameworks produced by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee and my Department, following the vaccination of those most at risk, future groups will be vaccinated by age, in cohorts of 10 years (i.e., 64-55; 54-45, etc.).

The move to an age-based model better supports the programme objectives by:

- protecting those at highest risk of severe disease first, which benefits everyone most;
- facilitating planning and execution of the programme across the entire country;
- improving transparency and fairness.

Further details are available here: [www.gov.ie/en/press-release/93f8f-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-irelands-vaccination-prioritisation-list/](http://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/93f8f-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-irelands-vaccination-prioritisation-list/).

Frontline healthcare workers (HCWs) in direct patient contact roles are being vaccinated in Group 2. This includes HCWs working in public, private, and voluntary settings.

### Commencement of Legislation

157. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health when the sections of the Health Identifiers Act 2014 which have not been commenced will commence; the current impediments stopping the progress of the sections; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20999/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health Identifiers Act provides the legal basis for the introduction of a system of unique health identifiers for (a) individuals and (b) health services providers in Ireland. The Individual Health Identifier (IHI) is a key enabler for integrated care and eHealth as it facilitates joining of disparate health records about the same patient from different healthcare settings.

To date, Sections 7(2)-(6), 10(3), 11(1)-(5), (7), 12-20, 24, 35-39 have not been commenced. None of these are required in order for the HSE to implement current and immediately planned, deployments of the IHI but will be commenced as soon as they are required.

The IHI has already started to prove its value since the start of the pandemic and is core to the national covid vaccination programme. It was used to uniquely identify records for people

who went through the test and trace process, to ensure the health service established unique records on a national basis and regardless of where patients were treated. The IHI also proved valuable as people progressed through the covid care pathway.

As people use the covid vaccination portal they are asked for their PPSN. Combined with their first name, last name and date of birth, this enables the HSE to identify their IHI and create national vaccination records with unique record numbers. As services start to return to normal, there are plans to deploy the IHI into GP practice systems and into hospital patient administration systems later this year and into 2022. This will also assist in the management of outpatient waiting lists.

The HSE have operational responsibility for implementing the I.H.I. They plan to deploy the IHI on a phased basis into a number of national systems following deployment to GP practice systems and hospital PAS systems. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the further planned implementation of the IHI to other national systems was paused and instead, priority was switched to Covid-19 related initiatives.

The IHI forms part of the Covid-19 Case Tracker and is included on all Covid-19 referrals for tests or assessments, embedded in transactions from the point of referral for a Covid-19 test to the communication of test results to clinicians and to the individual.

The HSE IT system for the national Covid-19 vaccination programme has been developed at an exceptional pace and the IHI acts as the unique identifier assigned to an individual's vaccination record.

### **Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services**

158. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health the plans in place to reform the current pathway for trans healthcare for persons under 18 years of age who currently must go through CAMHS which does not have the experience to deal with gender dysphoria; the plans in place to establish a gender service in Ireland for those under 18 years of age; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21001/21]

**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.

### **Medicinal Products**

159. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if clarification will be provided on a matter regarding long-term immunosuppressants group 4 in relation to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21004/21]

**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**

160. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health when he plans to review the restrictions that apply to the numbers that can attend weddings; and if he will make a statement

on the matter. [21007/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Level 5 restrictive measures currently remain in place. Any measures introduced at any level of the Plan are aimed at limiting the spread and damage of COVID-19 and are necessary to protect our key priorities of supporting and maintaining health and social care services, keeping education and childcare services open and protecting the most vulnerable members of our communities.

The Government announced a slight easing of restrictions from 12 April in recognition of the significant impact that the extended period of Level 5 restrictions is having on people. The focus of this easing of measures is on enabling more outdoor activities in order to improve the health and wellbeing of society. The situation will be subject to ongoing review taking account of the evolving epidemiological situation, the impact of the reopening of priority services, and available evidence in relation to vaccine deployment, uptake and effectiveness. The NPHET and the Government will consider the position again at the end of this month and it is anticipated that a roadmap for the further easing of measures over the coming months will be agreed, including in relation to weddings.

Significant progress has been made on suppressing the virus due to the huge effort of our citizens. By working together, we have saved lives and limited the impact of the disease on society in Ireland. We all must continue to do everything possible to avoid the virus spreading.

The Government's guidelines for weddings at all levels of the Framework are available at: [www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-living-with-covid-19/](http://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-living-with-covid-19/).

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

161. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if a directive will be issued to operators of caravan and mobile home parks on a potential safe reopening date for their residents; and if those who own a mobile home within their own county will be permitted to visit and stay in the home during the county boundary restrictions on travel. [21013/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Level 5 restrictive measures currently remain in place. Any measures introduced at any level of the Plan are aimed at limiting the spread and damage of COVID-19 and are necessary to protect our key priorities of supporting and maintaining health and social care services, keeping education and childcare services open and protecting the most vulnerable members of our communities.

The Government announced a slight easing of restrictions from 12 April in recognition of the significant impact that the extended period of Level 5 restrictions is having on people. The focus of this easing of measures is on enabling more outdoor activities in order to improve the health and wellbeing of society. The situation will be subject to ongoing review taking account of the evolving epidemiological situation, the impact of the reopening of priority services, and available evidence in relation to vaccine deployment, uptake and effectiveness. The NPHET and the Government will consider the position again at the end of this month and it is anticipated that a roadmap for the further easing of measures over the coming months will be agreed.

Significant progress has been made on suppressing the virus due to the huge effort of our citizens. By working together, we have saved lives and limited the impact of the disease on society in Ireland. We all must continue to do everything possible to avoid the virus spreading.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

162. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if clarification will be provided on a matter (details supplied) in relation to a fully vaccinated person coming into the country who now does not have to quarantine but they will be travelling with their two children who are not vaccinated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21014/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As per the Health Act 1947 (Exempted Traveller) (COVID-19) (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations 2021, persons who are fully vaccinated, as well as any dependents who accompany them, are now exempt from the requirement to undergo quarantine in a designated facility. All such persons and dependents are however still required to adhere to all other current travel and public health advice, including the need to quarantine at home or in a suitable location, following their arrival.

It is important to note that such persons are considered fully vaccinated only when they have received all required doses of a European Medicines Agency approved vaccine and that the required amount of days have passed since their final dose of that vaccine. It should also be noted that the required amount of days varies by vaccine.

The Government continues to evaluate wider policy on international travel as informed by the epidemiological situation and public health advice, including the possibility of future exemptions.

Neither I as Minister for Health nor my Department have a role in decisions relating to whether individual persons must enter mandatory quarantine or whether individual persons are exempted travellers. All such decisions are to be determined in accordance with the provisions of the Act.

### **Health Services Staff**

163. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health if clarity will be provided on the pay restoration in section 39 workplaces (details supplied); and if those workers excluded from this process will be included in the new process during the second round of discussions which begin in May 2021. [21015/21]

176. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health his plans to ensure issues (details supplied) regarding section 39 pay restoration are addressed. [21024/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 163 and 176 together.

In October 2018, an agreement was reached by the parties at the Workplace Relations Commission in relation to a process of pay restoration for staff employed in a pilot group of 50 section 39 organisations who are funded by way of a Service Level Agreement (SLA). A further WRC agreement followed in December 2020 in relation to a final phase of 250 SLA funded organisations who were identified as part of the earlier agreement.

The objective of the pay restoration exercise is to restore pay reductions made to those eligible employees at a certain point in time. It is not an exercise to facilitate pay progression.

Only organisations who received in excess of an agreed, specified amount from the HSE by way of the Service Level Agreement process were included in this section 39 pay restoration exercise. Grant aid organisations were not included in this process. Pay restoration is absolutely limited and only applicable to those included in the WRC agreement.

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I can confirm that there is no scope to revisit the eligibility criteria for the process. Any further discussion will relate solely to those organisations identified in the WRC agreement.

### **Disabilities Data**

164. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons with disabilities in receipt of home support hours in each LHO area as of 1 April 2021 or the latest date available; the number currently on the waiting list for same in each LHO area; and the number waiting 0 to 3, 3 to 6, 6 to 12 and more than 12 months in tabular form. [21030/21]

**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.

### **Disabilities Data**

165. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons with disabilities in receipt of personal assistance hours in each LHO area as of 1 April 2021 or the latest date available; and the number waiting 0 to 3, 3 to 6, 6 to 12 and more than 12 months in tabular form. [21031/21]

**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.

### **Disabilities Data**

166. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of residential places for persons with a disability currently being provided as of 1 April 2021 or the latest date available by CHO in tabular form. [21032/21]

**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.

### **Disabilities Data**

167. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of new emergency places provided to persons with a disability as of 1 April 2021, by LHO in tabular form. [21033/21]

**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.

### **Disabilities Data**

168. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of children as of 1 April 2021 or the latest date available that were awaiting a first assessment from the HSE under the Disability Act 2005, in each LHO area in tabular form. [21016/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, the PQ has been referred to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

### **Physiotherapy Services**

169. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the physiotherapy waiting list in each local health area as of 1 April 2021 or the latest date available; the number waiting less than 4, 4 to 12 and more than 12 months; and the number waiting aged 0 to 4, 5 to 17, 18 to 64 and aged 65 plus in each category in tabular form. [21017/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Speech and Language Therapy**

170. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the speech and language therapy assessment waiting list in each local health area as of 1 April 2021 or the latest date available; the number waiting less than 4, 4 to 12 and more than 12 months; and the number waiting aged 0 to 17 and 18 years of age and above in each category in tabular form. [21018/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Speech and Language Therapy**

171. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the speech and language therapy initial treatment waiting list in each local health area as of 1 April 2021 or the latest date available; the number waiting less than 4, 4 to 12 and more than 12 months; and the number waiting aged 0 to 17 years and those aged 18 years of age and above in each category in tabular form. [21019/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As this is a service matter, the PQ has been referred to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

### **Speech and Language Therapy**

172. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on

the speech and language therapy further treatment waiting list in each local health area as of 1 April 2021 or latest date available; the number waiting less than 4, 4 to 12 and more than 12 months; and the number waiting aged 0 to 17 years and those aged 18 years of age and above in each category in tabular form . [21020/21]

**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.

### **Occupational Therapy**

173. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the occupational therapy first-time assessment waiting list in each local health area as of 1 April 2021 or the latest date available; the number waiting less than 4, 4 to 12 and more than 12 months; and the number waiting aged 0 to 4, 5 to 17, 18 to 64 and more than 65 years of age in each category in tabular form. [21021/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Disabilities Assessments**

174. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of children as of 1 April 2021 or the latest date available that were awaiting a first assessment from the HSE under the Disability Act 2005 in each local health office area in Dublin in tabular form. [21022/21]

**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.

### **Health Services Provision**

175. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 829 of 10 March 2021, if the situation regarding a unit (details supplied) has been reviewed in relation to rehabilitation bed availability; the number of admissions being accepted currently; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21023/21]

**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. 176 answered with Question No. 163.*

### **Proposed Legislation**

177. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health when the fair deal nursing home support scheme (amendment) Bill will be published; the reason for the delay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21039/21]

**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, the Programme for Government commits to introducing this amendment to the Nursing Home Support Scheme and work on the legislation has continued to progress. Officials in my Department and draftspeople in the Office of the Attorney General have been working intensively on drafting this legislation for several months, and I am pleased to say that a finalised draft of the Bill has now been signed by the Attorney General. I am sure you will appreciate that several steps must be completed before the Bill is laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas, including its approval by Government. I expect to bring the Bill to Cabinet for approval in the next couple of weeks. It will be published very shortly thereafter and presented to both Houses of the Oireachtas at the earliest possible opportunity.

### **Dental Services**

178. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the waiting list for orthodontic treatment nationally by CHO area; the number on the waiting list in the Dublin north city and county area; the number in each area who are in grade 5i level of severity in tabular form; the estimated length of time a patient can expect to wait for treatment such as in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21040/21]

**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.

### **Transport Policy**

179. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21054/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Currently, during level 5 restrictions, all staff in my Department have been advised to work from home except where it is essential that they work onsite. To encourage and facilitate employees to stay active, wellbeing guidance and advice is communicated on a regular basis, and all staff are reminded to take regular breaks.

In general terms, pre and post pandemic, staff in my Department are encouraged and facilitated to use active travel to commute to work in the following ways:

- The Cycle to Work scheme is available and promoted to staff.
- Miesian Plaza has secure and plentiful bicycle parking and excellent shower facilities.
- The Travel Pass scheme incentivises staff to use public transport which in turn encourages them to walk or cycle to and from train stations and bus stops.
- When the Department moved to our new headquarters in Miesian Plaza we reduced our available car parking spaces to further encourage staff to cycle or walk to work.

I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy in respect of the staff of the HSE and Section 38 agencies under their remit. The information relating to the Non-Commercial State Agencies under the remit of my Department is being collated and will be forwarded to the Deputy by separate cover.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

180. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Health when cataract surgery will be carried out for a person (details supplied) at University Hospital Limerick; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21066/21]

**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.

Elective hospital care was curtailed for the first quarter of 2021, in line with the rapid increase in Covid -19 hospital admissions, with only critical time dependent elective procedures undertaken.

On 23 March the HSE published the “Safe Return to Health Services Plan”. This plan outlines a three phased approach for the proposed restoration of services across Community Services, Acute Hospital Operations, Cancer Services and Screening Services. It sets target times for their safe return and details the conditions and challenges that will have to be met. Every phase of the plan has been informed by clinical guidance and putting patient and staff safety first. Decisions in relation to the type and volume of activity will be made at site level based on local COVID-19 numbers, available capacity and guidance from national clinical leads.

The schedule outlined in the plan for resumption of services will be regularly monitored by the HSE and updated as appropriate, dependant on public health advice and healthcare capacity.

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.

### **Paediatric Services**

181. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Health the number of children that have a diagnosis of juvenile arthritis; the number of children that have a diagnosis of other autoimmune diseases; the number of full-time paediatric consultants available to provide care for these children; the number of children waiting for a first appointment with a paediatric consultant rheumatologist; the average waiting time; his plans to recruit additional paediatric consultant rheumatologists; the status of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21069/21]

**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, including rheumatology.

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.

Elective hospital care was curtailed for the first quarter of 2021, in line with the rapid increase in Covid -19 hospital admissions, with only critical time dependent elective procedures undertaken.

On 23 March the HSE published the “Safe Return to Health Services Plan”. This plan outlines a three phased approach for the proposed restoration of services across Community Services, Acute Hospital Operations, Cancer Services and Screening Services. It sets target times for their safe return and details the conditions and challenges that will have to be met. Every phase of the plan has been informed by clinical guidance and putting patient and staff safety first. Decisions in relation to the type and volume of activity will be made at site level based on local COVID-19 numbers, available capacity and guidance from national clinical leads.

The schedule outlined in the plan for resumption of services will be regularly monitored by the HSE and updated as appropriate, dependant on public health advice and healthcare capacity.

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.

Children’s Health Ireland (CHI) has advised my Department that they sincerely regret that children and their families are experiencing long waiting times for their rheumatology appointments and they are making every effort to reduce these waiting times including the scheduling of additional outpatient clinics in CHI at Connolly this year.

CHI has further advised that the Rheumatology service in Crumlin has appointed a Consultant Rheumatologist position following a successful recruitment campaign. It is expected that the Consultant will be available to take up their post in 2022. CHI’s intention will be to work closely with the new appointee and the current rheumatology team to develop strategies to ad-

dress the waiting times for patients on the waiting list.

In relation to the number of children awaiting a first Outpatient appointment with a Consultant Rheumatologist at Children's Health Ireland, the table attached shows the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) published figures by time-band for Rheumatology Outpatients at the end of March 2021. The waiting list figures relate to the speciality of Rheumatology and cannot be broken down by medical diagnosis, therefore the number of children with a diagnosis of juvenile arthritis or other autoimmune diseases who are on this waiting list cannot be provided.

#### Outpatient Waiting List for Rheumatology at Children's Health Ireland as at 26/03/2021

	0-3 Months	3-6 Months	6-9 Months	9-12 Months	12-15 Months	15-18 Months	18 Months +	Grand Total
CHI Rheumatology patients	129	120	66	46	91	74	732	1,258

### Drug and Alcohol Task Forces

182. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if additional funding will be provided for drug task forces in view of the increasing demands on such services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21081/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** Drug and alcohol task forces have a key role in coordinating inter-agency action and supporting evidence-informed approaches to problem substance use. The network of 24 task forces receives €29 million in annual funding from the Department of Health and the HSE. These resources should be directed towards interventions and strategies which are most likely to reduce problem substance use and improve public health.

To support the development of the Framework for the Restoration of Drug and Alcohol Services, once-off funding of €480,00 was provided in November 2020 for the provision of drug and alcohol services during Covid-19. The funding included the adaptation of services, premises, online meetings, and personal protective equipment. The funding was allocated to the network of 24 Drug and Alcohol Task Forces for distribution to community and voluntary drug and alcohol services in their areas. Each task force could apply for up to €20,000 in once-off funding to meet Covid-19 related costs.

Budget 2021 allocated €10m in new developments for drug and alcohol services and inclusion health. This includes €1m for targeted drug and alcohol initiatives through the network of drug and alcohol task forces. This money will be used to expand services, especially in areas and communities that have limited access to services.

Over the last few months, I have met with drug and alcohol task forces to discuss support for their work in identifying and responding to local needs, including the challenges for people who use drugs during Covid-19. I will announce details of the new €1m funding in due course.

### Legislative Reviews

183. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health when terms of reference for the three-year review of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 will be published; if a company or organisation has or will be commissioned in relation to the service user and service provider strands of the review; the name of the company if one has been

chosen; the terms of reference it has been given; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21082/21]

184. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health when the public consultation regarding the three-year review of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 is due to commence; the form it will take; the procedures and systems being put in place to ensure as wide a public consultation as possible; if all submissions submitted will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21083/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 183 and 184 together.

The Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 was signed into law on 20 December 2018 and commenced on 1 January 2019. Section 7 of the Act states that “The Minister shall, not later than 3 years after the commencement of this section, carry out a review of the operation of this Act”.

The review is scheduled to be progressed in 2021 and will be overseen by my Department. It is anticipated that it will take a three-part approach to reviewing the operation of the Act, with strands focusing on service users, service providers and a public consultation.

Research to inform the service user and service provider strands will be commissioned and carried out independently. My Department will manage the public consultation, which will extend a public invitation to all interested groups/organisations and individuals to provide their views to inform the review of the operation of the legislation. At the current time it is intended that any submissions received will be published, unless the individual or group making the submission indicates that they do not consent to it being made public.

My Department will collate and analyse the findings of the three strands of the review. Upon completion a full report, with any necessary recommendations, will be submitted to me, as Minister, for consideration.

## **Healthcare Policy**

185. **Deputy Louise O’Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendation 3.1 of Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; if the targets that were set in the recommendation were met within the ten-year period; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21088/21]

192. **Deputy Louise O’Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendation 4.6 of Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019; the way in which hypertension is being prioritised in primary care; the way in which this fits into the general practitioner contract; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects that are outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21095/21]

201. **Deputy Louise O’Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendations 5.13, 5.14 and 5.15 of Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21104/21]

211. **Deputy Louise O’Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implemen-

tation of recommendation 8.2 of *Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019*; the cardiovascular health services information system that exists currently; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21114/21]

212. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendation 8.3 of *Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019*; the cardiovascular-specific datasets that have been agreed and mechanisms established for collection of this information; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21115/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 185, 192, 201, 211 and 212 together.

The cardiovascular policy, *Changing Cardiovascular Health* covering the period 2010-2019, built on the first national cardiovascular health strategy, entitled *Building Healthier Hearts* (Department of Health 1999). The reorganisation of care was reflected in the national cardiovascular strategy in 2010 which proposed the centralisation of cardiovascular services in order to maximise access, expertise and population coverage which formed part of the consideration of the current National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services. All the other recommendations in the *Changing Cardiovascular Health National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019* have an identified lead organisation.

The National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services commenced in January 2018 with Professor Phillip Nolan as Chair of the Steering Group. This Review aims to achieve optimal patient outcomes at population level with particular emphasis on the safety, quality and sustainability of the services that patients receive by establishing the need for an optimal configuration of a national adult cardiac service. This aligns with the Sláintecare reform programme.

While substantial progress has been made on the Review, the COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted on the progress of the review, as the Chair has played a key role in the national COVID-19 response, both as a member of the NPHE and Chair of the Irish Epidemiological Modelling Advisory Group. However, it is intended that the Review will continue and work is now underway to progress this over the coming months.

The National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services with specific terms of reference is cognisant of the *Changing Cardiovascular Health National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019* recommendations.

## Healthcare Policy

186. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendation 3.2 of *Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019*; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; the reductions in inequality in cardiovascular health targets that were achieved in this time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21089/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The cardiovascular policy, *Changing Cardiovascular Health* covering the period 2010-2019, built on the first national cardiovascular health strategy, entitled *Building Healthier Hearts* (Department of Health 1999). The reorganisation of care was reflected in the national cardiovascular strategy in 2010 which proposed the centralisation of cardiovascular services in order to maximise access, expertise and population coverage which formed part of the consideration of the current National Review of Specialist

Cardiac Services. All the other recommendations in the *Changing Cardiovascular Health National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019* have an identified lead organisation.

The National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services commenced in January 2018 with Professor Phillip Nolan as Chair of the Steering Group. This Review aims to achieve optimal patient outcomes at population level with particular emphasis on the safety, quality and sustainability of the services that patients receive by establishing the need for an optimal configuration of a national adult cardiac service. This aligns with the Sláintecare reform programme.

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The National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services with specific terms of reference is cognisant of the *Changing Cardiovascular Health National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019* recommendations.

### Healthcare Policy

187. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendation 4.1 of *Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019*; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; the series of campaigns that took place in a phased manner as per the action; if interim evaluations guiding the next educational phase took place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21090/21]

188. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendation 4.2 of *Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 - 2019*; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21091/21]

191. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendation 4.5 of *Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019*; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21094/21]

193. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendation 4.7 of *Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019*; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21096/21]

194. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendation 4.8 of *Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019*; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21097/21]

195. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendation 4.9 of *Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019*; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21098/21]

196. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementa-

tion of recommendations 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4 and 5.5 of Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21099/21]

197. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendations 5.6 and 5.7 of Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21100/21]

198. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendation 5.8 of Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21101/21]

200. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendation 5.12 of Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21103/21]

202. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendation 5.16 of Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21105/21]

203. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendation 5.24 of Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21106/21]

205. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendations 6.1, 6.2 and 6.3 of Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019; the actions taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21108/21]

206. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendations 6.4, 6.5 and 6.6 of Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019; the actions taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21109/21]

207. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendations 6.9, 6.10 and 6.11 of Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019; the actions taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21110/21]

208. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendations 6.12, 6.13 and 6.14 of Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019; the actions taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21111/21]

209. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendations 6.15, 6.16, 6.17 and 6.18 of Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019; the actions taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21112/21]

210. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implemen-

tation of recommendation 7.6 of Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019; the actions taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21113/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 187, 188, 191, 193 to 198, inclusive, 200, 202, 203 and 205 to 210, inclusive, together.

The cardiovascular policy, *Changing Cardiovascular Health* covering the period 2010-2019, built on the first national cardiovascular health strategy, entitled *Building Healthier Hearts* (Department of Health 1999). The reorganisation of care was reflected in the national cardiovascular strategy in 2010 which proposed the centralisation of cardiovascular services in order to maximise access, expertise and population coverage which formed part of the consideration of the current National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services. All the other recommendations in the *Changing Cardiovascular Health National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019* have an identified lead organisation.

The National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services commenced in January 2018 with Professor Phillip Nolan as Chair of the Steering Group. This Review aims to achieve optimal patient outcomes at population level with particular emphasis on the safety, quality and sustainability of the services that patients receive by establishing the need for an optimal configuration of a national adult cardiac service. This aligns with the Sláintecare reform programme.

While substantial progress has been made on the Review, the COVID-19 Pandemic has impacted on the progress of the review, as the Chair has played a key role in the national COVID-19 response, both as a member of the NPHE and Chair of the Irish Epidemiological Modelling Advisory Group. However, it is intended that the Review will continue and work is now underway to progress this over the coming months.

The National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services with specific terms of reference is cognisant of the *Changing Cardiovascular Health National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019* recommendations.

These PQs also relate to operational matters and have been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply.

### Healthcare Policy

189. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendation 4.3 of Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019; if structured clinical care has been put in place; if he targeted individualised assessment and management of cardiovascular disease in primary care; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects that are outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21092/21]

190. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendation 4.4 of Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21093/21]

199. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendations 5.9, 5.10 and 5.11 of Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21102/21]

204. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the implementation of recommendation 5.27 of *Changing Cardiovascular Health: National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019*; the campaigns that took place during this time; the frequency with which the campaigns took place; the actions that were taken to ensure full implementation; the aspects outstanding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21107/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 189, 190, 199 and 204 together.

The cardiovascular policy, *Changing Cardiovascular Health* covering the period 2010-2019, built on the first national cardiovascular health strategy, entitled *Building Healthier Hearts* (Department of Health 1999). The reorganisation of care was reflected in the national cardiovascular strategy in 2010 which proposed the centralisation of cardiovascular services in order to maximise access, expertise and population coverage which formed part of the consideration of the current National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services. All the other recommendations in the *Changing Cardiovascular Health National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019* have an identified lead organisation.

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The National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services with specific terms of reference is cognisant of the *Changing Cardiovascular Health National Cardiovascular Health Policy 2010 – 2019* recommendations.

*Question No. 191 answered with Question No. 187.*

*Question No. 192 answered with Question No. 185.*

*Questions Nos. 193 to 198, inclusive, answered with Question No. 187.*

*Question No. 199 answered with Question No. 189.*

*Question No. 200 answered with Question No. 187.*

*Question No. 201 answered with Question No. 185.*

*Questions Nos. 202 and 203 answered with Question No. 187.*

*Question No. 204 answered with Question No. 189.*

*Questions Nos. 205 to 210, inclusive, answered with Question No. 187.*

*Questions Nos. 211 and 212 answered with Question No. 185.*

## **Vaccination Programme**

213. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to a research paper (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21116/21]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As part of the Department of Health's COVID-19 response, the Research Services and Policy unit have developed a weekly COVID-19 vaccine research bulletin that signposts recent research publications relevant to the vaccine rollout. The purpose of the bulletin is to ensure awareness of published research evidence that may support the COVID-19 vaccination rollout in Ireland. This is relevant to the co-ordination of communications on the vaccine rollout and aspects of the work of the sub-groups IEMAG (Irish Epidemiological Modelling Advisory Group) and CBAG (Communications and Behavioural Advisory Group). The bulletin supports the work of these groups by keeping abreast of emerging evidence from COVID-19 vaccine-related research publications.

This bulletin is circulated widely, including to the Minister for Health, individuals on the Senior Management Team, members of IEMAG, CBAG, and the Vaccines Taskforce, and other staff in the Chief Medical Officer (CMO), Research & Development & Health Analytics, and Health Protection divisions within the Department of Health. The study referenced was included in the latest issue of the bulletin, that was circulated on Tuesday 20th April 2021.

It is important to note that the study referenced is, as the Deputy points out, a preprint. This means that the findings are preliminary and have not been peer-reviewed, which is a significant step in evaluating and validating the quality and credibility of a research publication.

New evidence related to COVID-19 vaccines is routinely circulated to the Office of the Chief Medical Officer and is also taken into consideration by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). NIAC is an independent expert group that provides evidence-based advice to the Department of Health on vaccines, immunisation and related health matters to inform health policies in Ireland.

The European Medicines Agency (EMA) has recently concluded an investigation into a number of reports of very rare, unusual blood clots occurring with low platelets in people following vaccination with Vaxzevria® COVID-19 Vaccine AstraZeneca. The EMA has added these unusual clotting events with low platelet counts as very rare side effects to the product information. This event is estimated to occur between 4 and 10 in every 1 million people. However, as so few events have been reported, there is a high level of uncertainty regarding the incidence of this extremely rare adverse event in any particular age group or gender. Although most cases of this rare event occurred in women under 60 years of age, this may be because of the higher rate of vaccination in healthcare workers who are predominantly female. In the UK the reported rate of events adjusted by sex and vaccination status was similar in men and women. A UK suggestion of a possible increasing incidence of this adverse event in the younger age groups has not been confirmed based on available European Economic Area (EEA) data. The EMA has requested new studies and amendments to ongoing ones to provide more information.

The risk/benefits of Vaxzevria® may vary by age. As alternative COVID-19 vaccines are available NIAC has revised the recommendations for use of this vaccine:

- Any authorised COVID-19 vaccine, including Vaxzevria®, is recommended for those aged 60 years and older including those with medical conditions with very high or high risk of severe COVID-19 disease

- Vaxzevria® is not recommended for those aged under 60 years including those with medical conditions with very high or high risk of severe COVID-19 disease

- A second dose of Vaxzevria® should not be given to anyone who developed unusual blood

clots with low platelets after the first dose

- Those who have received a first dose of Vaxzevria®:

1. Aged 60 and older should receive their second dose 12 weeks later as scheduled

2. Aged under 60 years:

- **with** a very high risk or high-risk medical condition should receive their second dose 12 weeks later as scheduled

- **without** a very high risk or high-risk medical condition should have the scheduled interval between doses extended to 16 weeks to allow further assessment of the benefits and risks as more evidence becomes available.

### Forestry Sector

214. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on increasing the resources and staff of the forestry appeals and licensing process to ensure that all licences and appeals are processed in a timely manner including the clearing of the substantial backlog. [20862/21]

215. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the details of the average waiting times for licensing applications and appeals in the forestry appeals and licensing process between 1 September 2020 and 31 March 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20863/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 214 and 215 together.

I am aware of the issues facing the forestry sector and the timber industry and considerable efforts have been made to address them. Additional resources have been recruited including 21 new ecologists and training, information and guidance has been provided to both Departmental staff and registered foresters and, as a result, we have seen gains in terms of output.

The introduction of Project Woodland, recently launched by Minister of State Pippa Hackett, with responsibility for forestry, is our strategy for resolving the licensing issues. This new structure aims to ensure that the current backlog is addressed. The Project involves a review and refresh of our processes and procedures and includes outside stakeholder participation to bring an independent perspective. It is a task-driven process, with clear deliverable and milestones.

It is worth noting that there are always licences in the system at various stages of processing. These are the initial stages of an application being made, while the registered forester finalises application documents to referral to prescribed bodies, referral to the inspector and/or ecologist/archaeologist, to making final decision. Applications may also be returned to the applicant (and their registered forester, where relevant) for further information. A target to issue 4,500 licences in 2021 has been set which is a 75% increase on 2020.

The total number of tree felling licences issued to end March this year is up 56% on last year and up by 20% on felling licences issued. For afforestation licences, while the number of licences issued is down slightly on last year, the area licensed is up by 18%. Forestry road licences have far exceeded those issued to end March last year, the number issued is up 102% and the length of road licensed is up by 147% at over 75km. In total to date in 2021, my Department has issued 957 licences to end March.

The average time for a tree felling licence to issue, for those decisions issued from September 2020 to March 2021 is 11 months; for afforestation licence decisions, it is 9 months; and, for forest road licence decisions, it is 8 months.

The Deputy will be aware that the Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC) is independent of my Department.

Since the new Act was introduced, the FAC has issued decisions on 297 licences that were appealed with the average time from appeal to decision taking ten months.

There are currently 253 appealed licenses with the FAC of which 23% have been heard and the committees are finalising their decisions. A further 32% of the cases are scheduled to be heard in the coming months. I expect the remaining cases will be heard by 30th July, following which, I envisage there will be scope to turnaround the upcoming appeals within an average of a two-month period.

I remain hopeful and confident that the changes presented under the Project Woodland structure to processes within my Department will bear fruit, particularly to give confidence to all applicants that they can receive a timely decision on their forestry licence application.

### **Forestry Sector**

216. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the provisions that have been made for forestry planting under the new organic scheme and the new REPS scheme including the potential impact on backlogs in the forestry appeals and licensing process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20864/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I am proposing that tree planting actions will be provided for under the Agri-Environment Pilot Project (REAP) and such actions are also expected to feature under the CAP Strategic Plan including as part of the next CAP Agri-Environment schemes. This is in recognition of the many climate and biodiversity benefits when tree planting is done correctly. I would encourage all farmers to engage with these schemes and all relevant stakeholders to continue to input to the scheme design through the CAP consultation process.

However, such planting will be outside of the scope of forestry planting as they will not be defined areas of forestry. Therefore, neither will have any impact on forestry appeals or the licensing process.

### **Agriculture Scheme Appeals**

217. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a new date for an appeal will issue for persons (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20925/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I wish to inform the Deputy that the Agriculture Appeals Office operates independently of my Department.

I understand that an oral hearing had been organised in relation the appeal concerned but had to be cancelled by the person named due to COVID concerns.

I have been advised that due to restrictions now in place to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the Appeals Office has had to suspend the holding of oral hearings until further notice. Where an appellant has requested an oral hearing, the Office is offering the option of having the hearing held remotely or have the appeal decided without an oral hearing.

It is open to the person named to contact the Agriculture Appeals Office should they wish to have the hearing held remotely or the appeal decided without an oral hearing.

### **Aquaculture Development**

218. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will reopen the Covid-19 aquaculture support scheme to allow for the scheme to cover the period from 30 June 2020 onwards; if the eligibility criteria of the scheme will be widened to include aquaculture producers of other species excluded in the previous scheme, that is, abalone, trout and bottom mussels; and if the eligibility criteria is based on gatherers docketts and sales docketts which clearly state volume produced in a given year, rather than returns to BIM of the Annual Aquaculture Production and Employment Survey. [20955/21]

219. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider additional financial supports for the oyster sector which is facing a second year of its production cycle with difficulties in finding and accessing markets for its produce (details supplied). [20956/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 218 and 219 together.

Aquaculture enterprises with a 30% reduction in turnover because of Covid-19 have been eligible to apply to Revenue under the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme, an economy-wide enterprise support that focuses primarily on business eligibility. The scheme provides a flat-rate subsidy to qualifying employers based on the numbers of eligible employees on the employer's payroll and their gross pay. The Pandemic Unemployment Payment has also been available to self-employed aquaculture farmers whose trading income has ceased or reduced to €960 over a rolling 8-week period, or aquaculture employees laid off because of the Pandemic. These measures continue to be available to all sectors of our economy at very considerable cost.

Throughout 2020, my Department met regularly with the Irish Farmers Association to hear their views on the impact of the Pandemic on aquaculture and to discuss their submissions seeking financial supports. This led to the implementation of a Covid-19 Aquaculture Support Scheme in the second half of 2020 under my Department's European Maritime and Fisheries Fund Programme. This scheme was designed to address the needs for support identified by the IFA, specifically for the shellfish farming sector. The Scheme was open to rope mussel and oyster producers and provided a fixed payment based on enterprise size (in terms of historic production levels).

Payments were calculated to compensate for lost sales arising from the Pandemic over the period February to June 2020 and ranged from €1,300 for the smallest rope mussel producers to €9,000 for the largest, while for oyster producers who have higher costs of production, payments ranged from €6,800 for the smallest producers to €16,300 for the largest. Some 152 aquaculture enterprises benefitted from the scheme at a cost of €1.2 million, with a further 4 applications under consideration within BIM. The Scheme was well received by the IFA and the aquaculture sector.

On 13 April 2021, the IFA wrote to me seeking an extension of the scheme to compensate

for Pandemic related losses arising in the second half of 2020. The IFA is also requesting some changes along the lines of those described by the Deputy. My Department and BIM are presently examining this proposal and direct discussions with the IFA are being arranged.

### **Beef Industry**

220. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a decision has been made on a beef exceptional aid measure payment appeal by a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20964/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I wish to inform the Deputy that the Agriculture Appeals Office operates independently of my Department.

I am informed that a hearing of the appeal for the person named was held on 30th March 2021 and a decision will issue in relation to this appeal shortly.

### **GLAS Issues**

221. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a decision has been made on the request by persons (details supplied) in County Kerry to have the recent decision on their GLAS payment reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20968/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The persons named applied successfully for GLAS 1 with a contract commencement date of 1st October 2015. The GLAS contract was selected for an on-farm inspection 5th November 2020 and was notified of the inspection findings by letter dated 5th February 2021. This letter outlined the option of requesting a review of this decision.

The persons named subsequently submitted a request for a review of the inspection findings which was received on 16th February 2021. The review is currently in progress and the Department will be in direct contact, in writing, in the coming days regarding this request.

### **Greyhound Industry**

222. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of Irish-bred racing greyhounds exported to the United Kingdom in each of years 2015 to 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [20982/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Rásaíocht Con Éireann (RCÉ) is a commercial state body, established under the Greyhound Industry Act, 1958 chiefly to control greyhound racing and to improve and develop the greyhound industry. RCÉ is a body corporate and a separate legal entity to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

With regards to the export of greyhounds, under Council Directive 92/65/EEC (the “Balai” Directive), dogs moved commercially to another EU country from Ireland must be accompanied by an EU pet passport, be microchipped and have a valid rabies vaccination. Before travel, dogs must undergo a clinical examination by an authorised veterinarian, who must verify that

the dogs show no obvious signs of disease and are fit to be transported. Dogs must also have a health certificate issued by a Department veterinarian. These procedures ensure that only healthy dogs, over the age of 15 weeks, are permitted to be exported.

Exporters are required to comply with the provisions of the Council Regulation (EC) No 1 of 2005 on the protection of animals during transport.

My Department only issues health certificates for export once all the above criteria have been met.

It is not possible to establish figures for greyhound exports to other EU countries, including the United Kingdom for the years in question, as TRACES, the European Commission's online management tool for all sanitary requirements on intra-EU trade and importation of animals, does not distinguish between breeds of dogs moved commercially.

### **Agrifood Sector**

223. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the funding available for a proposed project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21000/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I am aware from media reports of a proposal to develop flour milling facilities in Co. Wexford.

The setting up of any new enterprise in the agri-food sector is welcome but requires in-depth research and financial analysis in order to determine that any proposed development is commercially viable. Whilst my Department is available to assist in such cases, any development must be industry-led and is a matter in the first instance for the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

I would, therefore, advise the potential developers to engage with Enterprise Ireland if they have not already done so on any potential supports available from that agency.

### **Animal Feedstuffs**

224. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department is giving consideration to expanding nationwide the pilot scheme currently being run by the Bantry marine research station which is investigating the effects of using red seaweed in animal feed as a means to reduce methane emissions from cattle; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21002/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The recently published AgClimatise Roadmap outlines my vision for the agriculture sector, a climate neutral food system compatible with the Paris temperature goals. This vision for climate neutrality, in line with Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) guidance, requires that methane reduces out to 2050. Identifying ways to reduce methane is key priority for my Department in order to transition the sector to a more long term sustainable platform, all the while supporting farm incomes.

One possible pathway to reduce methane emissions from ruminant livestock is the addition of feed additives into the diet of the animal. Significant investment has been made in this regard. Since 2016, the Department has invested approximately €8m into projects looking at

methane from ruminant livestock. There are various feed additives that are being researched at this time by various research institutions in Ireland, including Teagasc, who are carrying out research projects testing various feed additives to reduce methane emissions such as the “Meth-Abate” project and also “SeaSolutions”.

I am aware of the potential of seaweed and, in particular, red seaweed to reduce methane emissions from livestock so I am very interested in the ongoing work at Bantry Marine Research Station Ltd. I believe this ongoing research will make a valuable contribution towards developing a long term solution to the issue of ruminant methane emissions.

There is a clear commitment in Ag Climatise to continue to fund research into this important topic and, building on all existing research work to date, I will strive to ensure that appropriate funding is made available over the years ahead.

### **Fishing Industry**

**225. Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will honour the commitment in the Programme for Government to work to retain factory weighing of pelagic fish in the context of negotiations on the new EU control regulation; the position regarding the current oversight of weighing systems in Irish fish production factories including tamper-proof systems that are observed by direct video link to the SFPA and subject to unannounced inspections by the NSAI at any time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21026/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Council Regulation 1224/2009, known as the Control Regulation, establishes a Community control system for ensuring compliance with the rules of the Common Fisheries Policy and establishing a level playing-field across the EU on fisheries control.

In 2018, the Commission published a proposal to amend the Control Regulation. The negotiations on the revised EU Control Regulation are currently ongoing at the Council Working Party. The Portuguese Presidency has indicated its intention to bring a general approach on the proposal to the Council of Fisheries Ministers in May.

The proposal has also been discussed by the European Parliament and last month, the Parliament adopted its negotiating position on the proposal. When both the Council and the Parliament have formally adopted their positions, trilateral negotiations will commence involving the EU Council, the European Parliament and the Commission.

My Department has been engaged fully in the negotiation process and continues to be actively involved in the ongoing discussions with the Presidency, other Member States and the Commission on the proposal. As set out in the Programme for Government, one of Ireland’s priorities for the negotiations is to retain the derogation for fisheries products to be weighed after transport under certain conditions. My Department has made this clear throughout the negotiation process. My Department has consulted with stakeholders during this process and will continue to keep them apprised of developments.

Under the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006, operational issues concerning sea-fisheries control are, as a matter of law, exclusively for the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) and the Naval Service. The issue of the Fisheries Control Plan, the discontinuance of the Control Plan submitted by the SFPA in 2012 and the new arrangements arising from this Commission Decision, as well as the oversight of weighing systems, are operational matters for the SFPA and I am precluded from getting involved in these matters.

## Agriculture Schemes

226. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if each agricultural planner can only submit ten applications for farmers under the proposed agri-environmental pilot project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21035/21]

227. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if it will be ensured that measures for the results-based payments under the proposed agri-environmental pilot project will not be weather dependent; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21036/21]

229. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the proposed agri-environmental pilot project is primarily replacing income forgone by farmers; if farmers will have to pay for training under the project; the reason the maximum payments, even with such strict eligibility criteria, have been set so low; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21038/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 226, 227 and 229 together.

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 aim the Results- Based Environmental Agri Pilot Project (REAP) is being launched this week.

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 up scaling 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. By linking payments to defined indicators the results-based model creates a financial incentive linked with outcomes for participating farmers. The model also makes it worthwhile for participants to gain an understanding of the conditions required for the delivery of optimum biodiversity and environmental benefits.

REAP will be funded under the technical assistance measure of the rural development programme and is subject to EU Commission approval of the 10th amendment to the RDP.

There will be no limit on the number of applications that each agricultural planner can submit for the REAP Project. Full details of the project including terms and conditions and specifications are available on the Department's section of the government website.

## Agriculture Schemes

228. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the way in which the additional €79 million allocated for agri-environment and farm safety initiatives in Budget 2021 will be allocated; the amount of this funding sourced from the carbon fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21037/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** An additional €79 million, including €23 million carbon tax, was provided in the budget to support action in the area of biodiversity, climate, environment and health and safety.

My intention is to allocate the funding as follows:

- Re-opening of the organic farming scheme €5m,
- Straw Incorporation measure (SIM) €10m,
- Agri-environment training for farmers €10m,
- REAP – Results based environment-agri pilot projects €10m,
- Soil sampling €10m,
- Farm Environmental Study €5m,
- TAMS environment €20m,
- Rewetting EIP – €3m,
- Continuous Professional Development for advisors €1m,
- Health and safety initiatives under EIP-AGRI €1m,
- Biodiversity actions for farmers and communities €1.25m and
- Peatland rejuvenation €3m.

EU approval is required and my Department has submitted the tenth amendment to the Rural Development Programme (RDP) to the European Commission for its approval, after which the final allocation of the €79 million funding will be decided.

*Question No. 229 answered with Question No. 226.*

### **Transport Policy**

230. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21045/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Cycle to Work scheme, as administered by the Revenue Commissioners, represents the clearest initiative targeted at facilitation of employees to use active travel to commute to work.

My Department has been an active participant in the Cycle to Work Scheme since its inception in 2009. This tax incentive scheme allows employers to purchase bicycles on behalf of employees and recoup the cost from the employee through salary deductions that are free of tax. In the period since the start of 2019, a total of 252 applications by staff members in the Department were made.

On 1 August 2020, as part of the Government's July Jobs Stimulus Plan 2020, the qualifying exemption limits were raised from €1,000 to €1,250 for a standard bicycle and €1,500 for an electric bicycle. This measure has resulted in increased application levels among staff in my Department, with scheme applications to date in 2021 at treble the rate for the equivalent period in both 2019 and 2020.

The matter of promotion of the use of active travel for the work commute by employees of State Bodies 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 on the matter.

### **Remote Working**

231. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the locations and number by county of the eHubs for remote working to be developed referred to in the Rural Development Policy 2021-2025 - Our Rural Future; the person or body that will develop these facilities; the timeline for delivery of same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [20945/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The increased shift to remote working as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has given us the opportunity for a greater regional distribution of jobs and to support a better quality of life for many people who previously spent many hours in long commutes.

Remote working has the potential to transform rural Ireland, allowing people to build careers in good quality jobs while continuing to live closer to home, and to generate increased economic activity in our rural towns.

Building on an initiative by the Western Development Commission in developing a network of remote working and co-working hubs along the western seaboard, an Inter-Departmental Working Group, chaired by the Secretary General of my Department, was established last October to oversee the development of a National Hub Network. The first phase of the Group's work is to identify, map, survey and classify the various remote working facilities available throughout the country. Over 400 hubs have provisionally been identified, with the mapping and surveying of these hubs ongoing. The first iteration of this map will be published in the coming weeks.

This data-gathering work has identified an ecosystem of hubs operating across the country that is varied in terms of location, capacity and client base. These hubs are also diverse in their ownership models, running a wide range from directly state-owned, to private-for-profit, to social enterprises. My Department, supported by the Western Development Commission and the other members of the Inter-Departmental Group, are now engaged in the establishment of an integrated network of these remote working facilities with shared back-office services and a common booking engine for hub users. I expect to be in a position to outline the results of this work over the course of the year.

In addition to the supports and tools being developed under the National Hub Network programme, I have allocated €5 million to fund a Connected Hubs Call under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme this year. This initiative will provide funding to support small scale capital works in existing hubs and Broadband Connection Points.

My Department also continues to invest significantly in the provision of new Hub facilities across the country. Only this week, I announced €75million for 24 landmark projects under the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund. Many of the successful projects involve the regeneration of historic town centre buildings as Enterprise and Co-Working Hubs.

### **Transport Policy**

232. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the

way in which her Department and agencies under her remit encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [21058/21]

**Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Department of Rural and Community Development has two office locations, one in Dublin and one in Mayo. Employees are encouraged to cycle to work where possible. To help facilitate this, there are bike racks in each office as well as showers available for staff who choose an active commute to work. My Department promotes the tax incentivised Cycle to Work scheme, which aims to encourage staff to cycle to and from work.

The Department also has a health and wellbeing programme whereby staff are encouraged to lead an active and healthy lifestyle. A range of initiatives have been led out on by the Human Resources unit, including the Department’s Step Challenge and lunch-time mile which encouraged staff to embrace physical activity as a means to contribute to the enjoyment of significant health and environmental benefits.

The majority of my Department’s staff are currently working from home, following Government restrictions in relation to Covid-19. Before these arrangements were put in place Dublin based staff availed of the “Tax Saver Commuter Ticket Scheme” and will be able to avail of this facility again, upon a return to the office.

The table below outlines how the Departments four agencies under its remit encourage and facilitate employees to use active travel to commute to work:

Charities Regulator	The Charities Regulator takes part in the Cycle to Work Scheme and provides showers and bike racks for staff who choose an active commute.
Western Development Commission	The WDC actively encourages employees to walk or cycle to work where possible and has opened offices in Galway and Sligo as well as Ballaghaderreen to facilitate local access for employees and to improve delivery to the citizen. The WDC actively promote the Cycle to Work scheme to staff.
Water Safety Ireland	Water Safety Ireland also take part in the Cycle to Work Scheme. They are currently examining ways to develop their facilities to further encourage active commuting.
Pobal	Pobal was an early adopter of the Cycle To Work Scheme and staff have been availing of this benefit for many years for making qualifying journeys to/from work. Pobal provides designated bicycle parking and shower facilities in most offices. Staff may also avail of the “Tax Saver Commuter Ticket Scheme” to use public transport and many staff combine public transport and active travel as part of their daily commutes.