

## Written Answers.

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

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*Questions Nos. 1 to 12, inclusive, answered orally.*

### Cabinet Committees

13. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment last met; and when the next meeting is planned. [29523/21]

14. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment will next meet. [29604/21]

15. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment will next meet. [30928/21]

16. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment last met; and when it will next meet. [31792/21]

17. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment last met. [31404/21]

18. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment last met. [31406/21]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18 together.

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment has been established and first met on 8 July 2020. It has met on a total of thirteen times, most recently on 27 May. The next meeting is not yet scheduled.

Membership of the Committee is comprised of the Taoiseach; Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Employment and Trade; Minister for Climate Action, Communications Networks and Transport; Minister for Finance; Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform; and Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht. Other Ministers or Ministers of State attend when required.

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment is responsible for issues relating to the economy and investment, and had an initial focus last year on developing the July Jobs Stimulus. It has also overseen the development of the Government’s Economic Recovery plan, as well as the ongoing review of the National Development Plan.

19. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach the membership and terms of reference of the National Security Committee chaired by the Secretary General of his Department. [29521/21]

20. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Taoiseach if he will provide a list of the membership of the National Security Committee; and when it last met. [29776/21]

**The Taoiseach:** I propose to take Questions Nos. 19 and 20 together.

The National Security Committee is chaired by the Secretary General to the Government and comprises representatives at the highest level of the Departments of Justice, Defence, Foreign Affairs, Environment, Communications and Climate and of the Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces.

The secretariat to the Committee is provided by the National Security Analysis Centre in my Department.

The Committee is concerned with ensuring that the Government and I are advised of high-level security issues and the responses to them, but not with operational security matters.

Having regard to the confidential nature of the work of the Committee, it is the long-standing practice not to disclose information about individual meetings or their proceedings. I can tell Deputies, however, that the Committee has met in respect of aspects of the State's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Committee meets as required and it will continue to do so.

In addition to the meetings, the members of the Committee liaise on an ongoing basis to monitor developments that might have national security implications, in particular in the international arena.

*Questions Nos. 21 to 31, inclusive, resubmitted.*

## **Enterprise Policy**

32. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Taoiseach the extent to which family businesses continue to contribute to the economy with particular reference for the need to so do in the aftermath of Brexit. [32510/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The exact information requested by the Deputy is not available. While the CSO's statistical Business Register contains a classification by legal form of enterprise, the statistics do not separately count family businesses. The closest approximation available is enterprises that are classified as Sole Traders or Partnerships. The latest year for which this information is available is 2018. Data for 2019 will be available in mid-July.

There were 270,344 enterprises in the private business economy in 2018, of which 141,916 (52.5%) were Sole Traders or Partnerships. These contributed 15.3% of total Persons Engaged and 4.2% of Turnover in the private business economy in 2018. The corresponding figures for the years 2015 to 2017 are provided in the table below.

The CSO's recent report on the Business Impact of Brexit on SMEs, which was published on Friday 11 June 2021, contains analysis of how small and medium enterprises have been impacted by and responded to Brexit: <https://www.cso.ie/en/csolatestnews/presspages/2021/businessimpactofbrexitonsmes2020/>

Table: Contribution of Sole Proprietors / Partnerships to the private business economy, 2015 to 2018

	2015	2016	2017	2018
	Number of enterprises	Number of enterprises	Number of enterprises	Number of enterprises
Total enterprises	248,843	250,033	271,166	270,344
Sole traders or partnerships	140,479	137,061	148,394	141,916
	Share of sole traders and partnerships in total private business economy (%)	Share of sole traders and partnerships in total private business economy (%)	Share of sole traders and partnerships in total private business economy (%)	Share of sole traders and partnerships in total private business economy (%)
Enterprises	56.5%	54.8%	54.7%	52.5%
Persons Engaged	17.5%	16.4%	16.3%	15.3%
Turnover	5.9%	4.3%	4.8%	4.2%

**Notes:**

1. If an Enterprise has the Legal Form of Sole Proprietor (sole trader), it does not necessarily mean there is only one person employed in the business. A Sole Proprietorship may have employees. Conversely, businesses with only one Person Engaged may have a legal form other than Sole Proprietorship (e.g. Limited Company).

2. The private business economy comprises the Industry, Construction, Distribution, Financial and Services sectors (NACE Rev 2 codes B to N, excluding code 64.20 "Activities of Holding Companies") as classified by the CSO.

**Cabinet Committees**

33. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Taoiseach when the Cabinet Committee on Covid-19 last met. [32240/21]

**The Taoiseach:** The Cabinet Committee on COVID-19 meets as required. It last met on 27 May.

**Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

34. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the funding issued under the small business assistance scheme for Covid-19 to date; and the number of businesses that have benefitted by county in tabular form. [32277/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** The table below provides the details requested by the Deputy on a per county basis for the SBASC scheme.

Details of the small business assistance scheme for COVID per county to date

Local Authority	Vol of Applicants	Value of Applications to date
Carlow	35	€ 140,000.00
Cavan	31	€ 124,000.00
Clare	76	€ 304,000.00

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Local Authority	Vol of Applicants	Value of Applications to date
Cork City	163	€ 652,000.00
Cork County	192	€ 768,000.00
Donegal	87	€ 348,000.00
Dublin City	357	€ 1,428,000.00
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown	104	€ 416,000.00
Fingal	167	€ 668,000.00
Galway City	57	€ 228,000.00
Galway County	90	€ 360,000.00
Kerry	107	€ 428,000.00
Kildare	89	€ 356,000.00
Kilkenny	56	€ 224,000.00
Laois	34	€ 136,000.00
Leitrim	14	€ 56,000.00
Limerick	137	€ 548,000.00
Longford	34	€ 136,000.00
Louth	93	€ 372,000.00
Mayo	131	€ 524,000.00
Meath	153	€ 612,000.00
Monaghan	68	€ 272,000.00
Offaly	87	€ 348,000.00
Roscommon	69	€ 276,000.00
Sligo	35	€ 140,000.00
South Dublin	153	€ 612,000.00
Tipperary	89	€ 356,000.00
Waterford	78	€ 312,000.00
Westmeath	60	€ 240,000.00
Wexford	118	€ 472,000.00
Wicklow	115	€ 460,000.00
GRAND TOTALS	3079	€ 12,316,000.00

As of June 11th 2021. Based on data from the LGMA. Not all applicants are approved.

### Workplace Relations Commission

35. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if the Workplace Relations Commission participated in joint operations with An Garda Síochána focused on the detection of labour exploitation in the fishing industry in 2020 or 2019; if so, the outcome of those inspections; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32145/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** At the outset I should emphasise that the Workplace Relations Commission inspectorate service is independent in its functions.

The Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) inspectorate contributes to multi-agency efforts to enforce the Atypical Worker Permission Scheme for Non-EEA Workers engaged on certain Irish-registered whitefish fishing vessels which was introduced by the Department of Justice and Equality in February 2016. The WRC liaises with these agencies/organisations, in-

cluding An Garda Síochána, from time to time and as required in relation to information sharing and other matters. Some 180 fishing vessels come within the scope of the Scheme.

I am advised by the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) that it participated in one joint, in-port, operation with An Garda Síochána in the period 2019 to 2020 and that the outcome in that case was a referral to the Department of Transport of matters which came with that Department's responsibility.

Some 454 fisheries inspections have been undertaken by WRC Inspectors since the introduction, in February 2016, of the Atypical Scheme for Non-EEA Workers engaged on certain Irish-registered fishing vessels. Some 323 contraventions have been detected to date by WRC Inspectors.

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

36. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his plans for continuing subvention of the travel agent sector given the extraordinary challenges ongoing (details supplied); the supports that will be offered to a sector suffering a continuing 80% to 90% revenue reduction as a result of Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32165/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Given the impact the necessary COVID-19 restrictions has had, it is likely that businesses in the travel sector, such as travel agents, will take longer to recover than those engaged in other sectors of the economy. It has been an incredibly difficult time for such businesses.

The Government's comprehensive package to help the wide range of businesses during the pandemic, including travel agents, includes the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), the COVID-19 Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), the Small Business Assistance Scheme for COVID (SBASC), low-cost loans, the deferral and warehousing of tax liabilities and the waiver of commercial rates.

In addition to these financial provisions, my colleague Mr Eamon Ryan T.D., Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, and Transport also provided access to the Refund Credit Note scheme which allowed travel agents to issue credit notes, underwritten by the State, to consumers in lieu of cash refunds. This measure helped further enhance the ability of travel agents to survive this crisis.

These schemes have been vital in sustaining businesses and workers, getting us to the point we have now reached. With the economy now re-opening in clear phases, and vaccine roll-out comprehensively underway, the Economic Recovery Plan sets out a renewed package of assistance, investments and policies for a new stage of economic recovery, providing a clear pathway for the labour market and enterprise towards new opportunities.

The Plan includes in excess of €3.5 billion in further labour market and enterprise schemes and just under €1 billion additional funding under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP).

This Plan comprehensively expands the EWSS and PUP, and provides clarity and certainty for businesses and employees over the period ahead by outlining next steps.

In addition, it extends CRSS as well as enhances the SBASC payment; extends the Commercial Rates Waiver until the end of September 2021; provides for a new additional Business

Resumption Support Scheme; extends Tax Debt Warehousing until the end of 2021; and further extends the 9% tourism VAT rate until September 2022. Information on the wide range of schemes can be found on my Department's website.

Eligibility for the SBASC for Q2 2021 applications has been broadened in two ways. Where businesses have a minimum turnover of €50,000 they can benefit from a €4,000 grant. This now includes businesses in non-rated premises, thereby benefitting self-employed people working from home, who meet all other eligibility criteria. It also provides for a grant of €1,000 for businesses with a minimum turnover of €20,000 and a maximum turnover of €49,999, with all other SBASC eligibility criteria applying. Applications for this Scheme close on 21 July 2021.

We are committed to the economic recovery of the country and work is ongoing across Government to ensure the assistance which will be in place is sufficient, targeted and sustainable.

I, along with my colleagues, Ms Catherine Martin T.D., Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht, and Mr Eamon Ryan T.D., Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, am fully committed to doing everything possible to support all those affected by the necessary restrictions implemented due to COVID-19, and including continuing to help businesses survive until such times as they can begin to trade in a meaningful way again.

### **Enterprise Support Services**

37. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of an enterprise centre (details supplied) in County Cork. [32172/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** The Enterprise Centre mentioned in the question commenced operations in 2016 and provides fully equipped office space, hot-desking facilities and meeting/training rooms for rent on a monthly, weekly or daily basis. The Centre has achieved almost 100% occupancy for its rented office space with ten tenant companies.

The Enterprise Centre is a not-for-profit entity led by a board of 14 directors with a five-person Enterprise Centre Management Group acting as the project executive members. Title to the Enterprise Centre is held by a local registered charity Community Forum.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, there has been a decline in numbers attending the centre with some clients working from home. However, all 10 tenant companies have retained their leases throughout and a steady increase in demand for the rental of hot-desk facilities has been noted.

In November 2020, due to the adverse impacts of Covid-19, some €8.24m in grants for 95 Enterprise Centres around the country under the Enterprise Centres Fund were announced. This centre was approved €84,400 under this fund. An expansion of hot-desk facilities with the support of the Enterprise Centres Fund is currently being planned.

### **EU Directives**

38. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the duties the EU directives in relation to the transfer of undertakings imposes on all employers in Ireland involved in such a transfer; the rights currently conferred on all employees as a result of this directive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32215/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** The European Communities (Protection of Employees on Transfer of Undertakings) Regulations 2003 (S.I. No. 131 of 2003) apply to any transfer of an undertaking, business or part of a business from one employer to another employer as a result of a legal transfer (including the assignment or forfeiture of a lease) or merger.

Regulation 8 of the Regulations provides that, in a transfer situation, both the original employer and the new employer must inform the representatives of their employees affected by the transfer, of

1. the date or proposed date of the transfer;
2. the reasons for the transfer;

3. the legal implications of the transfer for the employees and a summary of any relevant economic and social implications of the transfer for them, and any measures envisaged in relation to the employees.

The original employer must give this information to the employees' representatives, where reasonably practicable, not later than 30 days before the transfer and in any event, in good time before the transfer occurs. The new employer must give the information to the employees' representatives, where reasonably practicable, not later than 30 days before the transfer occurs and in any event, in good time before the employees are directly affected by the transfer as regards their conditions of work and employment.

If either employer envisage measures in relation to their employees, the employees' representatives must be consulted, where reasonably practicable, not later than 30 days before the transfer occurs and, in any event in good time before the transfer about such measures, with a view to reaching agreement. Where there are no employee representatives, the employers must arrange for the employees to choose (including by means of an election) representatives for this purpose.

Complaints relating to alleged contravention of the 2003 Regulations can be brought in the first instance to an Adjudication Officer of the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) and, on appeal, to the Labour Court. Any such case should be taken within six months of the date on which an employee considers that there has been a contravention of the Transfer of Undertakings Regulations.

### **Small and Medium Enterprises**

39. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the funding that will be provided to deliver a Ministerial-led SME and entrepreneurship implementation group to coordinate the delivery of supports for SMEs across all sectors of the economy in addition to the single SME portal to streamline access to assistance as outlined in the Economic Recovery Plan 2021. [32275/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** As Minister of State for Business, Employment and Retail, I am very proud of our small business community who have shown immense drive, commitment and flexibility during the pandemic.

I and my colleagues across Government must now determine how we adapt our current policies to futureproofing Ireland's workforce.

The Economic Recovery Plan focuses on anticipating and responding to the challenges ahead in terms of ensuring Ireland is well positioned to adapt and prosper into the future by having skilled people working in quality jobs in sustainable sectors.

Last autumn, the Tánaiste also established an SME Growth Taskforce of entrepreneurs, business leaders and other stakeholders to fulfil the commitment made in the “Programme for Government – Our Shared Future”, to draw up an ambitious long-term strategic blueprint for SMEs and entrepreneurs beyond COVID-19.

The resulting ‘Report of the SME Taskforce: National SME and Entrepreneurship Growth Plan’, which was published in January 2021 by my Department, sets out a wide range of recommendations with long-term strategic relevance for SMEs and entrepreneurs.

Importantly, the recommendations in the Report include measures to help SMEs and entrepreneurs to start up, scale up and access foreign markets, as well as recommendations aimed at helping SMEs to become more productive and ready for the transition to a digital, green economy.

My Department and its Agencies will be central to driving the recommendations of the Report. These proposals while not yet Government policy, are being reviewed and taken forward, as appropriate, by the Ministerial-led SME and Entrepreneurship Growth Plan Implementation Group during 2021.

The Implementation Group is co-chaired by Minister Robert Troy and myself, and is supported by Department and Agency Officials, and is funded from within my Department’s current budget. The Implementation Group has already had a series of meetings where it has met with the Departments and Agencies who have responsibility for the policy and operational areas, and where appropriate the associated budgets, covered by the recommendations made by the SME Taskforce, to move these recommendations forward.

The SME and Entrepreneurship Implementation Group is committed to driving the new SME and Entrepreneurship Growth Plan, which is wholly beneficial to anyone trying to turn a business idea into a business reality.

## **Construction Industry**

40. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the provisions in place to require a primary tenderer to ensure that a contractor to whom a contract is awarded by that primary tenderer pays any sub-contractor in full for work undertaken and completed satisfactorily by any such sub-contractor; if there is a public register of defaulting contractors; the procedures for the registration of any such defaulting contractors to make future sub-contractors aware of any such previous defaults; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32283/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** The issue of payment disputes under construction contracts is addressed in the Construction Contracts Act, 2013 which applies to certain construction contracts entered into after the 25th July 2016.

The purpose of the legislation is to regulate payments, particularly the timing of payments, under a construction contract covered by the legislation. It provides important statutory payment protections for subcontractors in the construction industry who have been considered vulnerable in the payment cycle in that industry. It also provides a statutory entitlement to avail



of adjudication as a means of swiftly resolving payment disputes that arise under construction contracts.

There is also a general prohibition in section 3(5) of the Act that a provision in a construction contract is ineffective if it provides that the payment of an amount due to an Executing party or the timing of such a payment is conditional on the making of a payment by a person who is not a party to the construction contract.

Section 6(1) of the Act provides a right for a party to a construction contract to refer a payment dispute arising under the contract for adjudication. When this right is exercised, the parties to the contract may jointly agree to appoint an Adjudicator of their own choice. In circumstances where the parties cannot or do not agree as to whom to appoint, a party may apply to the Chairperson of the Construction Contracts Adjudication Panel under section 6(4) of the Act to appoint an Adjudicator to the dispute from the Ministerial-appointed Panel of Adjudicators. The adjudication will then be concluded within a set timeframe in accordance with the provisions of the Act.

As construction contracts, by their nature involve private contractual arrangements between parties, there is no statutory public register for cases where non-payment may have arisen. However, as stated above, the Construction Contracts Act, 2013 provides a statutory entitlement to avail of adjudication as a means of swiftly resolving such payment disputes in a professional and efficient way. Full details of the Construction Contracts Act, 2013 are available on the website of my Department at the following link:

<https://www.enterprise.gov.ie/en/Construction-Contracts-Adjudication-Service/>.

### **Departmental Policies**

41. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the estimated cost of introducing a universal basic income at the core social welfare rate of €203 per week; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32371/21]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** My Department has not examined the costs of introducing a universal basic income.

As the Deputy is aware, the Programme for Government includes a commitment to ‘Request the Low Pay Commission to examine Universal Basic Income, informed by a review of previous international pilots, and resulting in a universal basic income pilot in the lifetime of the Government’. Earlier this year, I formally requested the Low Pay Commission to examine this issue.

The Deputy will note that the terms of reference agreed by the Low Pay Commission for research on Universal Basic Income include “the different rates at which UBI could be set”.

The terms of reference for this research are again provided below.

The Low Pay Commission intends to provide a report to me on this research and their recommendations later this year.

I will then work with my officials to examine the Low Pay Commission’s findings and recommendations, including those on the rates at which a Universal Basic Income could be set. Estimated costs of the introduction of a Universal Basic Income will be examined at that time.

### **Universal Basic Income Study Terms of Reference**

**Question 1: What are the key messages from academic literature on UBI?**

- a) from the literature, identify the main policy objectives a UBI is expected to deliver
- b) from the literature, identify the key risks of introducing a UBI and potential mitigation actions

**Question 2: How have other countries run UBI pilots? And what can be learnt from them to guide Ireland's pilot?**

Examine Universal Basic Income (UBI) pilots in other countries, specifically:

- a. establish the main policy objectives that each pilot sought to examine;
- b. identify any potential policy objectives that were considered but then excluded and why;
- c. describe the scope of each pilot;
- d. summarise the findings of each pilot and assess their robustness;
- e. assess how, in retrospect, each pilot could have been improved, and
- f. draw conclusions from all of the above for any UBI pilot in Ireland.

**Question 3: How might a UBI in Ireland work? What policy objectives might a UBI aim to achieve in the Irish context?**

Consider the implications of the introduction of UBI in Ireland by examining:

- a. The different rates at which UBI could be set;
- b. the fiscal implications of the different potential rates of UBI (what it would cost in gross and net terms and how it might be funded);
- c. the possible interactions between UBI and other policy instruments, such as tax rates, social insurance rates;
- d. the labour supply implications of any tax changes needed to finance the introduction of UBI;
- e. the distributional consequences of the introduction of a UBI scheme compared to the current contingency-based scheme;
- f. depending on the differing UBI rates, what changes to other policy instruments might be considered as part of the introduction of UBI (might part of the state pension, carers allowance etc. be redesignated as a UBI payment?);
- g. the impact on recipients (e.g. health, education opportunities, etc.) and
- h. on the basis of the above, what research questions might a UBI pilot answer?

**Question 4: How might a UBI pilot be designed for Ireland? What question(s) should a UBI pilot aim to answer?**

Drawing on questions 1, 2 & 3, make recommendations for a UBI Pilot for Ireland, including areas such as:

- a. which policy objectives could be accurately assessed in a pilot;

- b. what risks would be associated with the pilot and how would they be mitigated;
- c. whether the payments made to participants in any UBI trial should be fixed across participants or based on the net payment they would receive after any anticipated tax/welfare changes.
- d. scope/parameters/rules;
- e. target population(s);
- f. expected expenditure on UBI payments during the course of the study;
- g. evaluation methodology;
- h. metrics, and
- i. data collection procedures.

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

42. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which he expects to continue to support family-owned businesses that may have suffered more than others during the lockdown; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32508/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English):** The Government's comprehensive package to help the wide range of businesses during the pandemic, including family businesses and workers, includes the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), the COVID-19 Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), the Small Business Assistance Scheme for COVID (SBASC), low-cost loans, the deferral and warehousing of tax liabilities and the waiver of commercial rates.

The schemes are there to help meet fixed costs that cannot be avoided and to provide basic weekly income support up to maximum of €350 per week. They are not created to provide compensation for loss of personal income above this level or compensation for loss of profits for any sector.

Budget 2021 provided a significant package of tax and expenditure measures to build the resilience of the economy and to help vulnerable but viable businesses across all sectors, and the new National Economic Recovery Plan includes €4 billion of stimulus to fuel the economy and for businesses to recover and rebuild.

The Plan has outlined the changes to the current financial supports as public health restrictions unwind, assuring that the CRSS will remain in place for businesses that have to stay closed. For businesses re-opening in June and July, they will receive a double payment for the first three weeks upon reopening up to a maximum of €30,000. This will help firms with cash-flow and to restock and re-engage with staff.

The PUP is a statutory income support for qualifying employees and the self-employed who have lost employment due to Covid-19. Under the Recovery Plan to support the reopening of the country, the PUP has been extended beyond the end of June 2021, in recognition that some sectors will continue to be impacted. The scheme is due to close for new applications from 1st July 2021 due to the progress in the roll out of the vaccine programme and reopening of the

economy. The PUP will continue to be paid at existing rates until 7th September, when the rate will commence a gradual reduction back to the Jobseekers rate on a phased basis. Further adjustments are scheduled from 16 November 2021 and from 8 February 2022. As recipients are placed on to the €203 rate, they will be transferred to standard Jobseeker terms commencing from this September.

A person in receipt of the PUP who is engaging in self-employment can earn up to €960 over a rolling eight week period and continue to maintain entitlement to PUP. Where a self-employed person exceeds this threshold and works up to 24 hours per week, they may be eligible for the Part Time Job Incentive scheme which has been extended to the self-employed who transition from the PUP. This enables a person to take up limited self-employment and retain a weekly personal payment of €128.60. This scheme will be available to the self-employed until the end of the year.

The Enterprise Support Grant (ESG) is available to eligible self-employed recipients who close their PUP and re-start their business. The grant, of up to €1,000, is payable to self-employed individuals who employ fewer than 10 people, have an annual turnover of less than €1 million and are not eligible for support from similar business reopening grants from other Departments. The ESG will continue to be available to self-employed people closing PUP claims on its current terms until the end of 2021, at which point it will revert to its normal rules. Self-employed people closing their PUP claim to reopen their business will be able to avail of this grant even if they have previously claimed it as part of a reopening in 2020.

Details of the PUP and the ESG are available on the website of the Department of Social Protection, which has the remit for these Schemes.

The EWSS is being extended until the end of 2021, the commercial rates waiver will continue during the third quarter of this year for those availing of it, the 9% VAT rate will be extended until the 1 September, 2022, tax warehousing is being extended until the end of the year and will be interest free in 2022.

Eligibility for the SBASC for Q2 2021 applications has been broadened in two ways. Where businesses have a minimum turnover of €50,000 they can benefit from a €4,000 grant. This now includes businesses in non-rated premises, thereby benefitting self-employed people working from home, who meet all other eligibility criteria. It also provides for a grant of €1,000 for businesses with a minimum turnover of €20,000 and a maximum turnover of €49,999, with all other SBASC eligibility criteria applying.

Applications close on 21 July for this scheme.

A streamlined Business Resumption Support Scheme will be introduced in September 2021 for businesses with significantly reduced turnover as a result of public health restrictions. More details will be announced shortly.

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

### **Departmental Schemes**

43. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress to date of the National Parks and Wildlife Service peatland scheme for large-scale peatlands restoration in 2021; the number of Bord na Móna employees reassigned

to date from peat harvesting activities; the number of Bord na Móna seasonal staff re-employed on each bog in which rehabilitation has commenced; the planned recruitment on each bog to be rehabilitated in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32377/21]

51. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications further to Parliamentary Question No. 140 of 11 May 2021, if he will provide details on the progress to date of Bord na Móna's large-scale peatlands restoration project and the number of Bord na Móna employees reassigned to date from peat harvesting activities; the number of Bord na Móna seasonal staff re-employed on each bog in which rehabilitation has commenced; the planned recruitment on each bog to be rehabilitated in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32376/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 43 and 51 together.

The Government is committed to a just transition in the Midlands region and has dedicated significant funding to supporting workers, companies and communities affected by the closure of the peat-fired power stations and the end of peat harvesting by Bord na Móna. The Government approved funding of €108 million for Bord na Móna's large-scale peatlands project to rehabilitate 33,000 hectares of peatlands. This project is seeing Bord Na Móna reassign employees from peat harvesting activities into rehabilitation operations while supporting the natural environment and biodiversity of the peatlands.

In 2020, following a public procurement process, Bord Na Móna were engaged by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to project manage, provide other professional services, and undertake restoration works within the designated raised bog network.

Since its appointment in April 2020, Bord Na Móna, overseen by a project working group, has undertaken significant preparatory works in advance of restoration measures at 9 project sites in the Midlands region, with a further 5 raised bog special areas of conservation to form part of this year's programme.

Combined, these schemes will support 350 jobs - taking seasonality into account, this equates to 230 full-time equivalent roles. Of the 350 jobs, approximately 330 will be from the existing workforce.

To date across counties Galway, Meath, Kildare, Westmeath, Offaly, Roscommon, Laois and Longford I'm advised that 152 jobs have been assigned. This is an increase of 47 posts since May 2021. This number will continue to increase through the summer.

County	Jobs to date
Galway	27
Meath	0
Kildare	10
Westmeath	4
Offaly	87
Roscommon	5
Laois	4
Longford	15
Totals	152

### National Broadband Plan

44. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications further to Parliamentary Question No. 222 of 3 June 2021, the number of premises connected and complete under the National Broadband Plan in counties Galway and Roscommon to date in tabular form. [32175/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** As set out in my reply to Question No 222 of 3 June 2021, there are 38,897 premises within the NBP intervention area in County Galway. I am advised by NBI that 15,290 of the premises have been surveyed. Surveying is complete or ongoing in the areas of Oranmore, Clarinbrige, Claregalway, Furbo, Barna, Ballinasloe, Kiltomer, Oatfield, Annagh, Kilconnell, Ahascragh, Inverin, Spiddal, Bealadangan, Costelloe, Rossaveel, Derroe, Carraroe, Sruthan, Loughrea, Kilnadeema, Kilchreest, Clostoken, Carrabane, Bullaun, Kilreekill and Heathlawn. Main build works are currently underway in areas of Galway and Ballinasloe with pre-build works underway in Gort. There are 19,185 premises within the Intervention Area in County Roscommon and NBI has advised that 8,268 of the premises have been surveyed. In County Roscommon surveying is complete or ongoing in the areas of Ballymurray, Athleague, Castlecoote, Donamon, Ballymacurley, Lackan, Kilroosky and Fourmilehouse. Main works have commenced in the areas around Ballymurray, Athleague, Castlecoote, Donamon, Ballymacurley, Lackan, Kilroosky and Fourmilehouse.

The following table sets out the areas where build works for the new high speed broadband network have commenced in Counties Galway and Roscommon and where premises are expected to be passed and available for connection later this year according to NBI.

Area	Number of Premises (approx.)	Current Status
Galway	3,502	Main build works underway
Ballinasloe	3,307	Main build works underway
Roscommon	3,591	Main build works underway

Further details are available on specific areas within Counties Galway and Roscommon through the NBI website which provides a facility for any premises within the intervention area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website [www.nbi.ie](http://www.nbi.ie). Individuals who register with this facility will receive regular updates on progress by NBI on delivering the network and specific updates related to their own premises when works are due to commence. I am advised that NBI is working to provide more detail on its website, with a rolling update on network build plans.

### Electricity Generation

45. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the actions he is taking to ensure that data centres do not disrupt or damage electricity supply to homes given the recent pronouncements from the Commission for Regulation of Utilities. [32263/21]

46. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the way in which the transition to electric cars can be expected when the volume of data centres located in the State is threatening electricity supply to homes given the recent pronouncements from the Commission for Regulation of Utilities. [32264/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 45 and 46 together. I propose to answer Questions 45 and 46

together.

The Government Statement on the Role of Data Centres in Ireland's Enterprise Strategy (2018) acknowledges the role of data centres as part of the digital and communications infrastructure for many sectors of our economy. The statement also notes that data centres pose considerable challenges to the future planning and operation of Ireland's power system.

Ensuring a continued secure supply of electricity is vital for the proper functioning of society and the economy. It is also necessary to ensure people and business have confidence in switching to electrified solutions such as heat pumps and electric vehicles.

The Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) has statutory responsibility, under S.I. 60 of 2005, to monitor security of supply of electricity and to

take such measures as it considers necessary to protect security of supply.

In this regard, on 8 June, the CRU published a proposed direction related to data centre grid connections. This direction, which is currently subject to consultation, proposes to prioritise the processing of data centre applications to connect to the electricity grid based on a number of criteria which are focused on security of supply. These criteria include location relative to grid constraints, ability to provide onsite dispatchable generation and/or storage and the ability reduce consumption when requested by the system operator.

My Department is also carrying out a review of the security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and natural gas systems which is focusing on the period to 2030 in the context of ensuring a sustainable pathway to net zero emissions by 2050. The review will consider the impact of increased electricity demand, including from data centres.

*Question No. 46 answered with Question No. 45.*

### **Natural Gas Grid**

47. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his position with regard to the proposed development of a LNG fracked-gas processing facility at Ballylongford, County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32315/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government set out that the Government does not support the importation of fracked gas and committed to developing a policy statement to establish that approach. On 18 May 2021, the Government's Policy Statement on the Importation of Fracked Gas was published. The policy statement sets out that, pending the outcome of a review of the security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and natural gas systems being carried out by my Department, it would not be appropriate for the development of any LNG terminals in Ireland to be permitted or proceeded with.

The review of the security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and natural gas systems is focusing on the period to 2030 in the context of ensuring a sustainable pathway to 2050. The review includes a technical analysis which will help inform a public consultation. The technical analysis includes identification and examination of the key risks to the security of supply in the electricity and natural gas systems; identification of options that could address or mitigate these risks in the period to 2030; and appraisal of these options in the context of ensuring a sustainable pathway to 2050.

It is planned that the technical analysis will be published and the public consultation undertaken in the second half of this year. The review, once completed, will be submitted to Government.

### **Waste Management**

48. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps being taken to eliminate the use of one-off plastics; if it is planned to legislate to ban the use of one-off plastics either immediately or on a phased basis; the barriers to doing this; the progress made in this regard in the past year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32317/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** The Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy outlines the measures Ireland is taking to substantially reduce the amount of single use plastic items we use and to sustainably manage the waste arising from those we do. The initial impetus in this area arises from the Single Use Plastics Directive (EU 2019/904) which has a transposition deadline of 3 July 2021. From this date single use plastic cutlery, plates, straws, balloon and cotton bud sticks may not be placed on the Irish market. This ban will also apply to expanded polystyrene cups and food containers and all products containing oxo-degradable plastic. The Plan also details our ambition to lead EU efforts on dealing with disposable coffee cups through the introduction of a latte levy and an eventual ban on disposable coffee and cold drinks cups.

### **National Broadband Plan**

49. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the estimated cost of missing the target for the roll-out of high speed rural broadband in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32366/21]

50. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the estimated cost of rolling-out high speed broadband across Ireland in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32367/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 49 and 50 together.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) contract with National Broadband Ireland (NBI) contains a number of targets and milestones to be completed by NBI in order to deliver the rollout of high-speed broadband services to all premises in the Intervention Area by 2026. NBI is only entitled to claim the payment of relevant subsidy when the targets and milestones have been met. Subsidy payments are therefore held until NBI meets the milestones set out in the NBP contract.

I stated recently that NBI has informed me that the target for homes passed in 2021 as part of the NBP rollout will be less than originally envisaged. This will have a financial impact in that less subsidy will be paid to NBI this year; the precise amount is uncertain at this stage. This will not impact the overall level of subsidy required for the NBP intervention. Payment of subsidy in 2022 will be linked to the achievement by NBI of milestones under the NBP contract and the 2022 allocation for the NBP will be determined as part of the 2022 Estimates process later this year.



*Question No. 50 answered with Question No. 49.*

*Question No. 51 answered with Question No. 43.*

### Departmental Funding

52. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the breakdown of the funding allocation for his Department for 2020 and 2021 by project. [32385/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The total Capital funding allocated to my Department in 2020 was €404.773m and for 2021 it is €616.925m, both of which include capital carryover from the previous year. My Department has responsibility for policy and programmes across a number of areas of national strategic importance, encompassing telecommunications; postal; energy; climate action; waste management, resource efficiency and the circular economy; environmental policy and air quality, and natural resources. These allocations support my Department as we work to achieve our long-term vision of a climate neutral, sustainable and digitally connected Ireland. **Key capital programmes and schemes funded by my Department in 2020 and 2021 are detailed below:**

Programme/Scheme	2020 Allocation	2021 Allocation
National Broadband Plan	€105m	€225m
Eircodes	€1.5m	€1.5m
National Digital Research Centre	€3.5m	€3.5m
Energy Poverty Schemes	€62m	€109m
Other Sustainable Energy Programmes	€62.8m	€153.8m
Energy Research	€9.7m	€17.2m
Renewable Energy Compliance	€50m	€12.3m
Tellus	€3m	€3.5m
INFOMAR	€4m	€4m
Landfill Remediation	€11.25m	€26.25m
Climate Initiatives	€5.56m	€6.71m
Just Transition	€6m	€11m
*Electric Vehicles	€36m	€0
**Trading Online Voucher Scheme (incl. Covid-19 scheme)	€32.6m	€0

\*Electric Vehicles were transferred to the Department of Transport from 2021.

\*\*Trading Online Vouchers were transferred to the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment from 2021.

The 2020 and 2021 capital allocations also include operational capital for my Department and a number of its agencies including SEAI, Inland Fisheries Ireland and the EPA.

A full breakdown of the funding allocated to my Department at a programme and subhead level is published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in the Revised Estimates Volume for the Public Service which can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/e20037-revised-estimates/>.

### Departmental Funding

53. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the breakdown of just transition funding; and the number of workers it is expected to support on an annual basis. [32386/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Just Transition Fund was established in 2020 to support innovative projects that contribute to the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the wider Midlands region and which have employment and enterprise potential. The Department held a competitive call for applications to this Fund, which closed on 17 July 2020, in response to which over 100 applications were received. 16 'Strand 1' projects, announced in September 2020, have concluded grant agreements with the Department, with a total Just Transition Fund allocation of €1.2m. Provisional grant offers were issued to a further 47 successful applicants through 'Strand 2', with a provisional funding value of €27.8m. The Department is currently in the process of finalising grant agreements with these projects. To date, contracts have been issued to 13 'Strand 2' projects with a total Just Transition Fund allocation of almost €6.5m.

There is a widespread allocation of funding for each of the eight eligible counties included in the Just Transition Fund, which include East Galway, Kildare, Laois, Longford, North Tipperary, Offaly, Roscommon and Westmeath.

Supported projects will create viable employment opportunities for workers affected in the Midlands region by the closures of the ESB power plants. Strand 1 projects have reported to my Department that they intend to create 28 full-time jobs, and that a further 175 indirect jobs will be supported as a result of this funding. This funding has also leveraged an additional €383,000 in the region. Once all grant agreements have been finalised, the Department will report on the breakdown of just transition projects by county and expected job creation numbers.

### **Departmental Data**

54. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the breakdown of the environment fund over the past three years. [32387/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Full details of the Environment Fund accounts are available at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f6b84-environment-fund-accounts/> Final accounts for 2020 are not yet available.

### **Departmental Funding**

55. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress to date regarding the funding of €1.2 million allocated to the UNCCD in 2018 to help develop a detailed implementation and reporting plan for the Great Green Wall initiative; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32388/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** In 2018, Ireland, acting through my Department, provided a contribution to the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) in support of the Great Green Wall (GGW) Initiative. The project costing €1,200,000 was built around two key pillars. - Pillar 1: "State of the Great Green Wall" Landmark Report (€200,000)

- Pillar 2: Development of a portfolio of transformative projects along the Great Green Wall

for future donor funding (€1,000,000)

The “State of the Great Green Wall” Landmark Report was formally launched at a High-Level Ministerial virtual conference held on 7 September 2020. UNCCD has advised that the Landmark Report has led to significant positive developments for the GGW. These changes can, at least in part, be attributed to the recommendations contained in the Landmark Report, supported by Ireland. The most significant development and a culminating milestone was the One Planet Summit, held on 11 January 2021, which saw the launch of a GGW Accelerator. The Accelerator will help all actors for the GGW Initiative to better coordinate, monitor and measure the impact of their actions and speed up implementation towards achieving the 2030 ambition. As a result of delays in finalising the Landmark report (Pillar 1), the launch of Pillar 2 has also been delayed compared to the envisaged timeframe. The Department is engaging with UNCCD to formalise a no-cost extension to utilise Pillar 2 of the grant.

### Climate Change Policy

56. **Deputy Darren O’Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the breakdown of costs associated with the Climate Change Advisory Council for the three most recent years; his views on plans to resource the Council for completing the responsibilities in the Climate Action Bill 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32504/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Climate Change Advisory Council was established by Ministerial Order (S.I. No 25 of 2016) on 18 January 2016 pursuant to section 8 of the Climate Change and Low Carbon Development Act 2015. The Advisory Council consisted of eleven members appointed by Government, acting in a part-time capacity for a statutory five-year term. The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021 strengthens the role of the Climate Change Advisory Council, tasking it, *inter alia*, with proposing carbon budgets to the Minister. To enable this the bill expands the Climate Change Advisory Council from eleven to fourteen members, and provides that future appointments to the Council provide for a greater range of relevant expertise and gender balance. These additional members will be remunerated in the same manner as the current group membership. The overall costs associated with the operation of the Advisory Council are provided for through the budget of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which is funded, in part, through my Department’s Vote. The costs for the last three years are set out in the table below. **Climate Change Advisory Council breakdown of expenditure 2018-2020**

Budget Item	2020	2019	2018
Council and Committee Meeting costs	€41	€11,887	€8,638
Remuneration and expenses of Council, Committee and guest presenters	€76,652	€79,747	€78,605
Printing, publications, subscriptions and office supplies	€11,293	€13,372	€4,406
Consultancy	€11,000	€3,590	
Research	€401,651	€68,828	€50,337
Operational overhead costs	€89,897	€92,643	€85,406
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>€590,534</b>	<b>€270,068</b>	<b>€227,393</b>

In addition, The Climate Change Advisory Council is supported in its work by four full-time EPA employees. Their salary cost is not included in the costs shown.

## **Telecommunications Services**

57. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which the provision of broadband throughout the country can attain the speed necessary to meet the added requirements of the country's population with particular reference to changes to working habits post-Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32511/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth):** Providing telecommunication services is a matter for the relevant service providers operating in a fully liberalised market regulated by the Commission for Communication Regulation (ComReg), as independent Regulator. I recognise how vital telecommunications services are to citizens for so many aspects of their daily lives, including remote working, studying and staying in touch with family members during the Covid-19 crisis. In April of last year, all major telecommunications providers in Ireland committed to a number of measures to help people stay in touch and work from home during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Since then, a number of operators have implemented further supports for consumers, such as for students in education, who require a high data usage package, by increasing data limits on many existing packages and by the introduction of new packages with very high, or unlimited data offerings. As a result, the market for mobile packages with very high, or unlimited data offerings, is becoming increasingly competitive, which is a positive development for consumers. Those commitments were further supported through regulations made under the Wireless Telegraphy Act 1926, enabling ComReg to release additional rights of use for radio spectrum on a temporary basis. Ministerial consent was granted for this framework proposed by the regulator to provide flexibility for mobile network operators to create additional capacity for mobile phone and broadband services and accommodate the increased demand due to Covid 19 related remote working and studying from home.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in over 544,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools. The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. A combination of commercial investment and the State led intervention will ensure access to high speed broadband in every part of the country no matter how remote. Of the 2.4 million premises across Ireland, 77% of premises now have access to high-speed broadband of more than 30 Mbps. National Broadband Ireland will address the remaining premises through the National Broadband Plan State intervention.

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

## **Electric Vehicles**

58. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Com-

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munications the number of electric or hybrid vehicles purchased by his Department in 2020 and to date in 2021, respectively in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32842/21]

**Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** No electric or hybrid vehicles were purchased by my Department in 2020 or to date in 2021. Only one vehicle was purchased during this time, a specialist four-wheel-drive diesel truck to support field operations of Geological Survey Ireland.

### Driver Test

59. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Transport if a driver theory test will be expedited for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32143/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Under legislation, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is the body responsible for the operation of the Theory Test. All enquires relating to the service are handled by the Authority. My Department does not have access to individual applications.

This question is therefore being referred to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

### Driver Test

60. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Transport if he will report on the plans of the Road Safety Authority to recommence the process of offering cancelled appointments to those applying for driver theory tests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32144/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Under legislation, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is the body responsible for the operation of the Theory Test.

The protocol for scheduling appointments is an operational matter for the RSA and I do not have any role in this process.

This question is therefore being referred to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

### Rail Network

61. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Transport if the reopening of the Wexford to Waterford rail line is to be considered as part of the Strategic Rail Review now underway; his views pending the outcome of this strategic review of the decision of Irish Rail to secure the Barrow Bridge in a permanently open position; his views on whether this action has implications for any future use of the bridge for rail or as part of a potential greenway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32168/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Deputy is aware, a *Strategic Rail Review* will commence shortly and the procurement process is well underway in relation to that *Review*. This *Review* will examine the rail network on the island of Ireland in relation to

improving sustainable connectivity between the major cities, enhancing regional accessibility, supporting balanced regional development and rail connectivity to our international gateways, with the latter also considering the role of rail freight.

The *Review* will also consider the potential scope for improved rail services along the various existing, or future potential, corridors of the network and that scope will certainly include the potential afforded by disused and closed lines such as the Wexford to Waterford line.

With regard to the Barrow Bridge, I can inform the Deputy that I am aware of the matter raised and indeed discussed the issue previously in the House in relation to this line generally.

As previously stated, it is the case the line has been closed to scheduled services for almost 11 years now. The National Transport Authority and Iarnród Éireann have agreed that, reflecting that fact, the bridge should be left in the 'open' position for marine traffic as trade continues of course in the port of New Ross. I am informed that the planned securing of the bridge in the open position in no way removes the future functionality of the bridge for carrying rail traffic should services on this line resume, nor, I would stress, does it in any way impede consideration of the line in the context of the *Strategic Rail Review*. I understand that Iarnród Éireann will ensure the continued functionality of the bridge through scheduled movements which will allay potential concerns that may exist as regards the permanency of the changed position.

I look forward to the *Strategic Rail Review* and its consideration of the strategic potential of the rail network on the island of Ireland, including the Wexford to Waterford line.

### Driver Test

62. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport when a person (details supplied) will receive a date for a driver theory test in view that it has been cancelled on numerous occasions previously; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32176/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** Under legislation, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is the body responsible for the operation of the Theory Test. All enquires relating to the service are handled by the Authority. My Department does not have access to individual applications.

This question is therefore being referred to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

63. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the additional air circulation or filtration measures that have been installed in train carriages since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic given that most train carriages do not have windows that can open for air circulation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32177/21]

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

Public transport operators have been advised of, and are closely following, public health instructions issued by the Health Service Executive (HSE) and the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) in relation to COVID-19.

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

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

### **Driver Test**

64. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Transport the arrangements being put in place to facilitate driver theory tests in County Wexford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32198/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Under legislation, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is the body responsible for the operation of the Theory Test. The information requested is held by the RSA and this question is therefore being referred to the Authority for direct reply.

I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

### **Driver Test**

65. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Transport when driving lessons are to resume for non-essential workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32199/21]

77. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport when essential driver training lessons for non-essential workers will resume; and the actions that will be taken to assist in clearing this backlog of non-essential workers waiting to take such lessons. [32205/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Under legislation, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is the body responsible for the operation of the Theory Test. The information requested is held by the RSA and this question is therefore being referred to the Authority for direct reply.

I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

### **Driver Test**

66. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Transport when driving tests will resume for non-essential workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32200/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Driving tests for essential workers will continue to be the priority for the driver testing service. In line with the gradual reopening of services, driving tests for all those who are eligible to take the test and have been waiting longest have recommenced in a limited fashion. The further opening of the driver testing service will be the subject of discussions between Department officials and the RSA in the coming weeks.

The health of both the public and the testers themselves must take priority, and as a result it is important to recognise that it will take time to get driver testing waiting times back to normal pre-Covid levels. The driving test creates particular difficulties, given the need for a tester and

a test candidate to sit in close proximity in the same vehicle for a substantial period of time. Testers are also moving between vehicles provided by test candidates, which are not controllable work environments.

From the start, it has been clear that the first priority is public safety. We want to provide services, and we know people are looking for services, but we will provide them only to the limit possible while preserving public health.

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

67. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the measures he is putting in place to assist driver instructors with the cost of restarting their sector; if he has engaged with unions representing driver instructors on the challenges the sector is facing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32229/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Approved driving instructors are not employed by my Department or the Road Safety Authority, but are independent private operators. The resumption of initial basic training for learner motorcyclists and the partial resumption of essential driver training on 10 May will generate increased custom, and therefore increased income, for instructors who had faced a downturn in business under previous public health restrictions.

To facilitate instructors in returning to work and meeting this increased demand, I signed regulations into law in early May, extending driver instructor licences issued between 1 September 2018 and 3 January 2021 for an additional 12 months.

As the second part of the Deputy's question is a matter for the Road Safety Authority, I have forwarded it to the Authority for direct response. I would ask that he contact my offices if no reply is received within 10 working days.

### **Driver Test**

68. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport if a theory test examination will be expedited in order that a person (details supplied) can commence work. [32235/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Under legislation, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is the body responsible for the operation of the Theory Test. All enquires relating to the service are handled by the Authority. My Department does not have access to individual applications.

This question is therefore being referred to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

### **Driver Test**

69. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Transport if an urgent driver theory test can be arranged for a frontline worker (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32284/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Un-



der legislation, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is the body responsible for the operation of the Theory Test. All enquires relating to the service are handled by the Authority. My Department does not have access to individual applications.

This question is therefore being referred to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

### **Departmental Policies**

70. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Transport the reason the recording of licences issued to fly drones on a county by county basis was discontinued; if this method of recording will be restored; the number of staff attached to the licensing and the enforcement sections; the number of drone licence operators that have availed of the training for basic piloting of drones out of the total 2,500 licence holders; the way in which a member of the public can verify the credentials of a licence holder; the number of times the IAA has had to use its enforcement powers; the number of administrative fines that have been issued since 2020; the number of complaints received by the IAA in relation to a perceived breach of European regulations or Irish law; if he plans to review and strengthen the Act; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32293/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** I understand that the Irish Aviation Authority provided a comprehensive response to the Deputy on 25 April in relation to a previous PQ (Ref 19413/21 for answer 21 April 2021) dealing with the recording of licences to fly drones issued on a county basis, the number issued for the last four years, the enforcement of regulations and the number of breaches in the past four years.

The subsequent issues raised here by the Deputy have been referred to the IAA for a direct reply. If the reply is not received within the next 10 days please do not hesitate to contact my office.

In respect of strengthening the Irish Aviation Authority Act 1993 and to assist with further enforcement of breaches of aviation safety regulations, section 72 of the Air Navigation and Transport Bill 2020, provides for enhanced enforcement powers by the IAA and the charging of fixed charges for offences. The Bill is scheduled for Dáil Committee Stage on 17 June 2021.

### **Fishing Industry**

71. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Transport if he will consider raising an issue (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32297/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** The Irish Authorities informed the European Commission and all European Union member states of potential safety issues with the “Euro-Cutter” type of fishing vessels in July 2013. This was done by means of a submission to the European Union Committee on Safe Seas, the COSS Committee.

This submission was developed on foot of an analysis carried out by the Marine Survey Office (MSO) of my Department regarding an individual vessel which had applied to be registered in Ireland. As part of this application the MSO carried out an analysis of the vessel and determined that it did not comply with Irish fishing vessel stability requirements. The MSO was concerned that this vessel may have been one in a series of similar vessels operating on the

flag of other European Union Member States, referred to as the “Euro-Cutter” type. The MSO made the submission to COSS on a precautionary basis and as an early warning to inform the European Commission and all other EU member states of potential safety issues to consider if they had similar vessels on their register.

### **Road Projects**

72. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Transport if there are plans to include provisions for cycling and walking along the new realignment of the N53 Hackballscross to Rassan, County Louth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32299/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport I have responsibility for overall policy and securing exchequer funding in relation to the National Roads Programme. Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 and in line with the National Development Plan (NDP), the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. This is also subject to the Public Spending Code Guidelines and the necessary statutory approvals. In this context, TII is best placed to advise you on the N53 project from Hackballscross to Rassan.

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

### **Driver Test**

73. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport if an essential worker (details supplied) will be offered an online theory test appointment or a physical theory test appointment in their own county. [32309/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Under legislation, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is the body responsible for the operation of the Theory Test. All enquires relating to the service are handled by the Authority. My Department does not have access to individual applications.

This question is therefore being referred to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

### **Aviation Industry**

74. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if he will contact airlines specifically an airline (details supplied) to require it to provide free of charge rescheduling of flights scheduled prior to 19 July 2021 to dates after 19 July 2021 when international travel restrictions have been lifted. [32314/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** Air passenger rights are protected by Regulation (EC) No. 261/2004, which covers the rights of airline passengers in instances of flight cancellations, among other matters. It provides that where a flight is cancelled then a consumer must receive a refund within seven days. However, there is no legal onus on airlines to refund where a flight goes ahead. Mindful of the position that Government has taken in relation to international travel in the interests of public health, the matter of consumer protection, consumer refunds and particularly fair treatment of air passengers who

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choose not to travel on Government advice, has been high on my agenda since assuming Office. I have taken many opportunities to impress on the main Irish airlines that their treatment of passengers who choose not to travel, for example in following Government advice, needs to be fair and reasonable. I have sought clarification from the two main Irish airlines on their current rebooking policies. Ryanair has clarified that the expiry dates for vouchers that were issued for flight cancellations last year are being extended so as to enable passengers to make bookings when travel is open again. I understand from their response also that a rebooking can be made with no flight change fee for travel before 31 October 2021. Finally, Ryanair has also informed me that that vouchers that were offered to customers whose flights were cancelled can be converted to cash at any time or can be redeemed for future bookings.

In continuing dialogue with the airlines, I will seek to ensure that passenger considerations are kept in focus.

### **Driver Licences**

75. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Transport the process involved in advance of applying for a limousine licence for new unregistered vehicles not listed on the considered qualifying list on the RSA website; the way it is determined how a new vehicle meets the criteria; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32320/21]

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

I have, therefore, forwarded your correspondence to the Authority for consideration and direct reply. Please advise this office if you do not receive a response within 10 working days.

### **Driver Licences**

76. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Transport if a driver licence can be extended for a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32321/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** A further extension to the validity of driving licences is currently being considered. However, it is not possible to extend an individual licence.

All enquires relating to individual applications for driving licences are handled by the National Driver Licence Service (NDLS), provided by the Road Safety Authority (RSA). My Department does not have access to such applications.

*Question No. 77 answered with Question No. 65.*

### **Electric Vehicles**

78. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Transport the number of electric or hybrid vehicles purchased by his Department in 2020 and to date in 2021, respectively in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32418/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** An overview of the vehicles owned by the Department is set out in the following table:

DEPARTMENT	Total Number Of Vehicles	Diesel	Petrol	Electric	Plug In Hybrid
Department - Air Accident Investigation Unit	3	3	0	0	0
Department - Rail Accident Investigation Unit	2	2	0	0	0
Department - Irish Coast Guard	222	221	1	0	0

Providing a sustainable, low-carbon transport system is a key priority of my Department. The Programme for Government commits to 7% average annual emissions reduction to 2030; ultimately, the goal is for a zero-emission mobility system by 2050. The national car and van (LGV) fleet accounts for almost 60% of all land transport emissions, and so a transition to low emissions vehicles, including EVs, is a necessary step-change to effect a substantial reduction in transport emissions. My Department is currently considering options for increasing the proportion of EVs across the public sector fleet.

### Public Transport

79. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to make provision for designated storage space for bicycles on public transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32419/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. As the Deputy is aware, the National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport and associated infrastructure. This includes the procurement of the PSO bus fleet and, in consultation with Iarnód Éireann, the procurement and requirements of additional rail fleet.

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

### Departmental Schemes

80. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Transport if online pre-booking requiring internet access and payment of a €2 fee is now a requirement for persons aged 66 and over availing of the free travel scheme on State public transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32517/21]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, I am responsible for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in day-to-day operational matters. The Free Travel Scheme is a non-statutory scheme administered by the Department of Social Protection.

The query raised appears to relate to Bus Éireann's commercial service, Expressway, and I have therefore forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply.

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

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

81. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Finance if the employment wage subsidy scheme will remain in place for childcare workers that would typically be in receipt of social welfare payments over the summer months or if it is expected that employers will maintain the scheme for this time period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32169/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Section 28B of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 provides for the operation of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), which is an economy-wide enterprise support for eligible businesses in respect of eligible employees. It provides a flat-rate subsidy to qualifying employers based on the numbers of paid and eligible employees on the employer's payroll and charges a reduced rate of Employers' PRSI of 0.5% on wages paid which are eligible for the subsidy payment.

While the criteria for eligibility for business in general is based on a reduction in turnover, as a result of the pandemic and having regard to the importance of maintaining the provision of childcare facilities so as to enable parents to continue in, or to take up, position of employment, the legislation provided that childcare businesses in possession of tax clearance and registered in accordance with Section 58C of the Childcare Act 1991 are eligible for the EWSS.

The objective of the scheme is to support all employment and maintain the link between the employer and employee insofar as is possible. The EWSS has been a key component of the Government's response to the continued Covid-19 crisis to support viable firms and to encourage employment in the midst of these very challenging times. To date, payments of over €3.4 billion and PRSI credit of over €565 million have been granted to 49,800 employers in respect of 579,400 workers.

I have been clear that there will be no cliff-edge to the EWSS and, as the Deputy will be aware from announcements made on Tuesday 1 June, it has been decided that the scheme is now to be extended until the end of December 2021.

For Q3 2021, the Government has decided to broadly maintain the status quo for EWSS, including the enhanced rates of support, with a modification to widen eligibility, and maintaining the reduced rate of Employers' PRSI of 0.5%. There are no changes in respect of the qualification criteria for EWSS eligibility for the childcare sector.

The Government has approved the extension of the EWSS for Q4 2021, however, it is considered too early as yet to prescribe the precise operational parameters of the scheme that should apply for that quarter. Decisions in that regard will be taken closer to the time, possibly around the end of August / early September, with the benefit of more up-to-date information on a number of variables, including the overall epidemiological situation, progress made in re-opening all sectors of the economy, the vaccine efficacy, as well as the operation of the EWSS during the early parts of Q3.

To answer the Deputy's specific question regarding the position as to whether the EWSS will remain in place for childcare workers that would typically be in receipt of social welfare payments over the summer months, I would note that this is a matter for the each individual employer to determine as appropriate to their business needs.

In general terms, where a childcare facility would normally close for the summer months

but due to current Covid-19 circumstances, the employer wishes to keep the employees on the payroll to open the facility, or to retain the employees on payroll for training or curriculum development purposes, etc., then an eligible employer can remain in the EWSS. This was the also the case last year when the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) was in place.

Furthermore, I would add that there is no distinction made regarding eligibility of the scheme or the subsidy amounts payable based on whether the business has closed or is operating with curtailed services due to the public health restrictions. All qualifying employers are entitled to claim the EWSS in respect of the eligible employees on their payroll.

### **Tax Code**

82. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance the number of forward purchase agreements that had been made prior to the passing of the financial resolution on 19 May 2021 providing for a 10% stamp duty measure on the bulk purchase of homes such that the residential units under such agreements will not be subject to the measure when they are completed; the number of such units; and the number of such forward purchase agreements that have been made since the passage of the financial resolution; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32503/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Financial Resolution passed by the Dáil on 19 May last provides for a new higher stamp duty rate of 10% where at least 10 residential units (excluding apartments) are acquired by an individual or a corporate entity such as a company in any 12-month period. This new measure is ‘triggered’ when a residential unit is acquired on or after 20 May 2021, with the ‘look-back’ 12-month period commencing at this time on a rolling basis. The units acquired during that period are aggregated. When the 10th unit is acquired, it is chargeable at the 10% rate and this rate also then applies to the other 9 units and to any other units acquired at the same time as the 10th unit. However, while any units acquired before 20 May 2021 are taken into account in establishing whether the threshold of 10 units has been reached, the 10% rate of stamp duty is not applied to these units but only to those units acquired on or after this date.

The Deputy will be aware that multiple purchases by Local Authorities, approved housing bodies, and the Housing Agency are outside the scope of this higher stamp duty. In this regard, you should also note that when putting this Financial Resolution on a permanent statutory footing, I propose providing an exemption from the 10% rate for the provision of the mortgage to rent scheme by private sector participants.

Finally, I am advised that the information sought by the Deputy in connection with forward purchase agreements is not collected by any Government Department. However, I will explore with the Minister for Housing, Local Government & Heritage and Revenue whether it is possible to put in place a reporting regime for agreements of this nature.

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

83. **Deputy Louise O’Reilly** asked the Minister for Finance the volume of money warehoused under the tax debt warehousing scheme by sector. [32262/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Debt Warehousing Scheme remains available to support businesses that are experiencing tax payment difficulties arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The scheme applies to VAT debts, PAYE (Employer) debts,

self-assessed income tax debts (balance of 2019 income tax liability and 2020 preliminary tax) and Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) overpayments.

The Government recently agreed to the extension of the tax debt warehousing scheme to allow the period where liabilities arising can be “warehoused” to be extended to the end of 2021 for all eligible taxpayers, with an interest free period during 2022, and to include overpayments of EWSS in the scheme. I hope to bring legislative proposals into the Dáil before the summer recess to give effect to these changes.

Approximately 86,000 businesses are currently availing of the Debt Warehousing Scheme in respect of over €2.4 billion in tax debt. The table below provides a sectoral breakdown of the debt currently ‘parked’ under the scheme.

Sector	€m	%
Wholesale and retail trade	658	27%
Accommodation and food service activities	302	12%
Professional, scientific and technical activities	287	12%
Construction	250	10%
Administrative and support service activities	171	7%
Manufacturing	159	6%
Information and Communication	154	6%
Transportation and Storage	124	5%
Financial and Insurance Activities	63	3%
Real estate activities	61	2%
Health and Social Work activities	58	2%
Arts, entertainment and recreation	54	2%
Other services activities	43	2%
Education	20	1%
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	19	1%
Other Sectors	24	1%
Grand Total	2,449	100%

### Tax Code

84. **Deputy Louise O’Reilly** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated cost of extending the 9% VAT rate until 1 September 2022. [32276/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** While it is difficult to estimate the cost of the extension, as it is difficult at this time to predict the level of activity in 2022, it is estimated that the extension will cost the Exchequer approximately €350m.

### Insurance Industry

85. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if insurance companies are providing refunds (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32279/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I note that the details supplied relate to a query about the provision of motor insurance rebates in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the Deputy will be aware, in line with the EU Solvency II Directive insurance framework, I cannot compel any insurer operating in the Irish market to provide refunds to their customers, as this is a commercial matter. As the Minister for Finance, I am also not in a posi-

tion to comment on individual cases.

Nevertheless, working to protect insurance policyholders during and after the COVID-19 crisis is a priority issue for Government, and is therefore included within the *Action Plan for Insurance Reform*. Throughout the pandemic, Minister of State Fleming and I have consistently called on insurers to treat their customers honestly, fairly and professionally, in line with the Central Bank's Consumer Protection Code. We have emphasised the importance of insurers supporting their customers during these difficult times by continuing to provide necessary reliefs, and responding to both the Government's insurance reforms and the pandemic by lowering premiums.

Minister of State Fleming has had extensive engagement with insurers on these points, including a series of meetings in April at which he pressed the need for premium reductions in light of the new Personal Injuries Guidelines. He outlined that upon renewal, the Government expects premiums to reduce for all classes of insurance, including motor insurance, and that insurers should consider increasing their risk appetite to provide increased cover in new areas.

This engagement was positive, with insurers indicating that they will lower premiums in response to the Guidelines. The issue of COVID-19 forbearance measures was included on the agenda for these meetings, and I understand that a number of firms indicated that they will also take account of COVID-19 restrictions when setting premiums. It is Minister of State Fleming's intention to meet with insurers again later in the year to review progress in this regard.

I am pleased to note that most of the main insurers operating in Ireland have twice renewed their commitment to forbearance measures announced by several members of Insurance Ireland last year. I believe it is important that insurers now take a long term view towards supporting their customers, as we work to rebuild the economy and recover from the impact of the pandemic. Both Minister of State Fleming and I will remain proactive in engaging with industry on this matter, as well as working with colleagues to implement further key reforms, which I hope will go some way to improving the cost of insurance for all groups, including motorists.

Finally, where somebody feels they have been treated unfairly by a particular insurance provider, they have the option of making a complaint to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO). The FSPO acts as an independent arbiter of disputes which consumers may have with their insurance company or other financial service provider. The FSPO can be contacted either by email at [info@fspo.ie](mailto:info@fspo.ie) or by telephone at 01-567-7000.

## Departmental Schemes

86. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if the help-to-buy scheme will be extended beyond 2021 for first-time buyers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32296/21]

**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.

An increase in the supply of new housing is fundamental to resolving the current housing crisis. One of the main aims of the policy underpinning the design of HTB was to help encourage the building of additional new properties. By restricting the scheme solely to new dwellings and new self-builds, it is anticipated that the resulting increase in demand for affordable new



build homes will encourage the construction of an additional supply of such properties. In accordance with a commitment in the Programme for Government, HTB was enhanced in July 2020.

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.

### Departmental Bodies

87. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance the number of developments in which all or a portion of units in that development are subject to forward purchase PRS sales that have been funded through Home Building Finance Ireland since it came into operation; the value of the funding; the number of units in each development that are subject to forward purchase PRS sales; the rental price of each or any of those units that will or have been subsequently made available to rent; the average rental price; and his views on whether these issues were not addressed in the recent Home Building Finance Ireland review published by his Department on 10 May 2021. [32446/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Since inception, HBFI has provided funding to house builders for over 2,400 homes across 17 counties, comprising of approximately 56% houses and 44% apartments. To be clear, HBFI funds the construction of new homes and does not lend to the end buyers of these homes, whether they be institutional funds, Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs), local authorities or other categories of buyer.

Based on the information available to HBFI, these homes are broken down as follows:

1,359 houses, of which:

- 815 intended for sale to individual buyers
- 479 intended for sale to AHBs and local authorities for social housing
- 65 intended for private rental

1053 apartments, of which:

- 202 intended for sale to AHBs and local authorities for social housing
- 851 intended for private rental

The figures above are based on information currently available. There may be some final variations on the figures at the conclusion of the construction process.

To date HBFI has approved funding for 5 developments as set out in the table below where part or all of the development is either sold (contract in place) or it is intended to be sold by the builder/developer (where no agreed sales or contract in place) to the private rental market.

Development No.	Funding Approved by HBFI for Private Rental element of Project	No. of Units in Each Development for Private Rental
1	€84.36m	307
2	€11.23m	48
3	€94.00m	287
4	€53.18m	211

Development No.	Funding Approved by HBFI for Private Rental element of Project	No. of Units in Each Development for Private Rental
5	€21.27m	63

In respect of the 916 units identified for private rental, 851 of these are apartments and 65 are houses, with institutions the likely primary category of buyer - although in a number of cases HBFI will have no visibility at this stage of the end buyer. The delivery of apartments through such advance purchases is in line with how apartment developments are funded more generally in the market and is designed to increase supply in this part of the market.

HBFI provides funding for the construction phase of a development on a commercial basis and has no role in the letting or renting of completed units in the same way as any other financial institution providing similar development funding.

HBFI has €730m of funding available for residential development, with an ability to raise a further €750m if required. The funding of large-scale developments has not and will not impact on its ability to fund small and medium sized developments. These smaller developments are the core of HBFI's business and will continue to remain so.

### Departmental Policies

88. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the a recent paper published by the ESRI on 3 June 2021 which argues for an increase in State borrowing to increase Irish housing supply; his views on its findings; and if he will alter the fiscal policy in order to double the level of capital investment in public housing in Budget 2022. [32447/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The paper to which the Deputy refers calls for higher levels of borrowing to increase public spending on housing, but it is important that we place this discussion in full context.

Last year, a general government deficit of €18½ billion was recorded – the equivalent of nearly 9 per cent of modified gross national income (GNI\*). For this year, the Stability Programme Update projected a deficit of another €18 billion. This was before the announcement of a range of support measures in our National Economic Recovery Plan, which will add approximately €2¼ billion to the deficit this year.

In terms of housing, the Government has already made extensive commitments in this area, including a record Exchequer funding allocation of €3.1 billion in Budget 2021. Total housing expenditure has more than doubled since 2016 and as of 2021, it will be more than 40 per cent above the peak level in 2008. It is therefore a gross simplification to suggest that providing additional housing is purely a matter of increasing Exchequer funding.

While public investment has an obvious role in alleviating housing market pressures, there are also significant non-fiscal constraints. In particular, the public health measures needed to suppress Covid-19 have placed a direct restriction on the construction of new housing. The industry is now facing increased costs and difficulty sourcing building materials as a result of the pandemic, high international demand, and Brexit. There are also skills shortages within the construction sector, which is why the Government is providing significant investment in skills and trades. As acknowledged in the report, simply increasing expenditure will not negate these capacity constraints.

From a broader fiscal perspective, as we move beyond the extraordinary events of the pan-

demographic, it is important to remember that it is neither sustainable nor prudent to run perpetual deficits. This fact is underlined by the European Commission's recent announcement that the General Escape Clause of the EU fiscal rules should not extend beyond 2022.

Pre-pandemic, Ireland's level of public debt per capita was one of the highest in the developed world – this level of debt has of course increased as a result of our response to the crisis. We must build up fiscal buffers to deal with the clear fiscal challenges ahead, so we can address future shocks by providing support at the right time – as we have done during the pandemic – and steadily reduce our public debt to lower and safer levels. Ireland cannot afford to become a fiscal outlier, as we saw during the crisis of only a decade ago.

### **Insurance Industry**

89. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the policy statement published by the Financial Conduct Authority on 28 May 2021 to end the practice of dual pricing in the insurance market; if his Department has consulted with the Financial Conduct Authority, the Central Bank or the insurance industry on the details of this policy statement and its impact on insurers operating in both the Irish and British markets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32448/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Deputy will be aware that the Programme for Government includes a commitment to work to remove dual pricing, a form of differential pricing, from the insurance market. In this regard, the Action Plan for Insurance Reform also commits to examine the forthcoming final report and recommendations of the Central Bank *Review of Differential Pricing in the Motor and Home Insurance Markets* and take any appropriate actions as deemed necessary, in light of the final report. The Central Bank's Interim Report, published in December, marks an important milestone in its review of the issue and summarises the initial observations from its ongoing market analysis and consumer research. I look forward to the final report being published shortly.

I note that the Central Bank has stated that differential pricing can be associated with both benefits and costs for consumers. Accordingly, completion of the analysis will be essential in order to ensure a full market perspective, evidence-based conclusions and in turn appropriately calibrated regulatory interventions as are needed to apply to the specificities of the Irish market. In addition, the associated consumer research will also provide insights which will be essential to the Central Bank's overall analysis.

Both Minister of State Fleming and I have repeatedly called on the industry to treat its customers fairly and in line with the Central Bank's Consumer Protection Code. Minister of State Fleming has raised his concerns with the main insurers that dual pricing in particular may be unfair for some customers and that they be proactive in responding to the Central Bank's interim findings. However, the Government also believes that prior to proposing solutions, it is essential that the Bank's Review be completed, to ensure remedies are evidence-based and do not impact consumers negatively, including impacting the ability of consumers to shop around for better deals. This position is consistent with the Action Plan for Insurance Reform.

In advance of the publication of that report, my Department is proactively considering issues raised in the general debate on this, including the Private Member's Bill proposed by Deputy Doherty in February. As part of this work, it is examining recent developments in the UK, where the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) has announced a ban on the practice of 'price walking' for motor and home insurers, to come into effect next year. This is the practice where providers initially offer a lower premium to new customers, which is then increased in

subsequent years on renewal. While my Department is not directly consulting the FCA on its policy statement at this time, my officials are engaging, both through our Embassy in London and directly, with the UK Treasury on this and other financial services issues of relevance. I would expect that during the course of its work, in particular following the publication of the Central Bank's final report, it will consult all relevant stakeholders as necessary to ensure any policy solution proposed is fully considered and evidence-based.

### **Electric Vehicles**

90. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Finance the number of electric or hybrid vehicles purchased by his Department in 2020 and to date in 2021, respectively in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32843/21]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I can inform the Deputy that the Department of Finance has no record of purchasing any vehicles in 2020 or to date in 2021.

### **Departmental Properties**

91. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the cost of the new premises acting as an administrative centre for NAMA and the NTMA. [32150/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The NTMA and NAMA are responsible for the provision of their own office accommodation and the Commissioners of Public Works have no involvement in the matter.

### **Flood Risk Management**

92. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform further to Parliamentary Question No. 69 of 21 April 2021, the status of the flood relief scheme for Clifden, County Galway; the surveys of the catchment area of the Owenglin river that have been carried out or are planned as part of the flood relief scheme; the examination of natural flood management techniques in the catchment area of the Owenglin river that are planned or have been carried out to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32178/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** A potential flood relief scheme was recommended for Clifden as part of the National Flood Risk Management Plans, published in 2018, which identified 118 new projects nationwide to be progressed under the National Development Plan 2018 – 2027. Following this proposal, the Office of Public Works confirmed to Galway County Council (GCC) that it would fund the costs of developing and implementing a scheme to alleviate fluvial flooding from the Owenglin River in Clifden.

The Council has worked in collaboration with the OPW to develop a project brief to procure engineering consultants to review the high level flood mitigation options proposed under the FRMP for Clifden, and to progress a viable Flood Relief Scheme to detailed design stage. The design process will include a more detailed assessment of the flood risk within the Owenglin River Catchment, with a view to identifying flood defence measures for Clifden which are viable, cost effective and environmentally sustainable. The surveys required for the development of the scheme will be identified in due course. The design process will also consider Natural Water Retention Measures (NWRM), including upstream water storage, as part of the detailed

assessment of flood relief measures for the scheme. The process will include further consultation with relevant Stakeholders, and the general public will be given the opportunity to discuss and feed into the flood mitigation options under consideration for Clifden.

Galway Co. Council, acting as the Contracting Authority, went to tender for consultants, to further develop the scheme for Clifden in March 2021. I have been advised by my officials that the tender documentation and briefing material provided by GCC to the prospective tenderers for this tender competition included the full requirements for environmental assessments associated with a flood relief scheme of this nature.

The tender competition has now closed and the Council is currently in the process of assessing the tenders, with a view to appointing consultants to progress the development of a flood relief scheme for Clifden in the coming weeks.

### **Departmental Circulars**

93. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform further to Parliamentary Question No. 527 of 24 March 2021, the work his Department has undertaken to replace circular 39/07 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32202/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** In reply to your previous question on this matter, I advised that my Department is considering the matter and will be developing a process for reviewing and re-drafting the guidance. This remains the position at this point. My officials will revert to you when the process has been finalised.

### **Departmental Policies**

94. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the details of the proposed development of a shared Government data centre to support the digitalisation of Government services as part of the draft national recovery and resilience plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32294/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The proposed new Government Data Centre will be a purpose-built facility owned and operated by Government. It will be built on state land and will be operated and managed by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine on behalf of the state.

The new Government Data Centre will be developed at the Government's Backweston Laboratory Campus in Celbridge, Co. Kildare, which currently comprises various facilities for the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the State Laboratory.

This project is part of the Government's ICT strategy which is focused on creating ICT shared services to support integration across the wider public service in order to drive efficiency, standardisation, consolidation, reduction in duplication and cost control. The Data Centre will provide the foundation and platform on which our digital reforms and transformations will be built.

The objective of the Government Data Centre is to deliver high-quality Data Centre facilities which are fit for purpose and are capable of meeting the Government's requirements now and in the future. In doing so it will support and enable the Civil Service Renewal 2030 Strategy, the Public Service Data Strategy and the Government's 2021 Digital Strategy and thereby

provide a much better experience of Government Services for the people of Ireland.

### Civil Service

95. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on a recent remote working report (details supplied) in which 88% of civil servants surveyed indicated that they feel as effective when working remotely as they are during normal working arrangements and that three-quarters of staff surveyed indicated that they would like to continue to access remote working in the future if given the choice; his plans to provide such choice for flexible and remote working for civil servants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32295/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The Government, has committed, in the Programme for Government, to mandating public sector employers to move to 20% home and remote working in 2021. In this context, My Department is, as a matter of priority, working with employers across the Civil Service to develop the longer term approach to remote working in the sector. My Department is also working closely with the wider public sector to ensure a consistency of approach. To this end the Department is working on a *Blended Working Policy Framework for Civil Service Organisations* which will assist those organisations in developing long-term remote working policies.

It is proposed that remote working in the Civil Service, post pandemic, will be facilitated on a blended basis, subject to roles being deemed as suitable to be carried out remotely.

### Civil Service

96. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the actions taken to date on foot of the Budget 2020 announcement to review future workforce and office requirements for the Civil Service including the location of support offices and services to ensure consistency with the goals of Project Ireland 2040 and balanced regional development; the percentage of staff home and remote working on a permanent basis to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32378/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The Government, has committed, in the Programme for Government, to mandating public sector employers to move to 20% home and remote working in 2021.

In this context, my Department is now, as a matter of priority, working with employers across the Civil Service to develop the longer term approach to remote working in the sector.

Different working models are possible, one of which is the concept of regional Government office “hubs”. Similar to many Government buildings in provincial towns, establishing well located departmental office hubs is certainly one option for consideration. Any decision to set up regional hubs requires: careful analysis of the most suitable locations; must meet the operational needs of Government Departments; and must be consistent with the National Planning Framework.

There is no central information on numbers of Civil and Public Servants currently working from home.

## Election Expenditure

97. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the remuneration returning officers and staff received for carrying out their duties in the local and European elections in 2019 and the General Election in 2020, by constituency in tabular form. [32422/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The total remuneration that Returning Officers and staff received for carrying out their duties in the Referendum and European Parliament and Local Elections in 2019 and the General Election in 2020 are set out in the table below. The remuneration information is laid out by Returning Officer rather than by constituency. The Deputy is aware that a number of Returning Officers such as the four Cork and Dublin Sheriffs have a number of constituencies for which they are the Returning Officer. I have arranged for my Department to send the Deputy the scales of maximum charges that lay out the calculation of fees for each of the electoral events.

With regards to the 2019 Event, there were 3 European Constituency Returning Officers for the European and Local Elections (Dublin County, Mayo and Cork City). Each Returning Officer took the election event in their respective counties and then forwarded their ballot boxes to the relevant European Constituency RO who then conducted the count with regard to their area of responsibility.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-06-16\_pq97-16-06-21\_en.docx">Table</a>]

## Public Sector Pay

98. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to reverse the FEMPI cuts to the fees of barristers contracted by the State to defend and prosecute criminal law matters; the reason such fees have not reversed while other FEMPI cuts have been addressed; if he plans to meet barristers' representatives; his views on the impact of these cuts on the operation of the State's legal services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32474/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As the Deputy will be aware, the reductions in counsel fees over the period of 2009-2011 were underpinned by Government decisions and formed part of a broader Government need to reduce costs across the public service.

I fully acknowledge and appreciate the very important work undertaken by barristers who prosecute criminal work on behalf of the State and my Department has engaged constructively with key stakeholders including the Bar Council of Ireland, the Office of Director of Public Prosecutions and the Department of Justice in relation to this matter. In particular it has sought evidence to support any claims that the reductions imposed are linked to significant recruitment and retention issues, thereby potentially adversely impacting the administration of justice. While my Department has not yet been provided with evidential data to support such claims, it remains available to review any further information that may be provided.

My Department has also sought advice from the Attorney General's Office as to whether the State has an obligation in relation to these professional fees. My Department will continue to keep this issue under review and engage with key stakeholders, as appropriate.

## **Defence Forces**

99. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the timeframe in which issues in relation to rates of pay, allowances and overtime for Defence Forces personnel will be considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25078/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I refer to the Deputy's question in respect of matters related to the remuneration of members of the Defence Forces. In this regard I wish to refer to the new public service agreement, Building Momentum, and Commission on the Defence Forces.

In December 2020 negotiations concluded on a new public service pay agreement entitled 'Building Momentum', which will apply for the next two years. The agreement was accepted by my colleagues in Cabinet and ratified by the public services committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions on 23rd February.

The proposals in Building Momentum – a new public service agreement, 2021-2022 will apply to those employees in grades represented by unions in membership of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions or other unions or representative associations, including the Defence Forces associations, which have notified the Workplace Relations Commission of their intention to comply with the Agreement.

The Agreement provides for the following pay adjustments:

- A general round increase in annualised basic salary for all public servants of 1% or €500, whichever is greater, on October 2021;

- The equivalent of a 1% increase in annualised basic salaries to be used as a Sectoral Bargaining Fund, in accordance with Chapter 2 of the Agreement, on 1 February 2022;

- A general round increase in annualised basic salaries for all public servants of 1% or €500, whichever is greater on, 1 October 2022.

The establishment of an independent Commission on the Defence Forces "Commission" is an important commitment in the Programme for Government. The Commission is tasked with undertaking a wide ranging review of structural and organisational arrangements in the Defence Forces. It will examine remuneration structures as part of its work.

The Commission was established in December 2020 and is required to report to the Minister for Defence within 12 months of establishment. When the Commission reports, I will give consideration any recommendations regarding remuneration structures which must be consistent with public service pay policy.

## **Departmental Policies**

100. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the proposal for a shared Government data services centre as per the Recovery and Resilience Fund will be publicly run and not contracted out to a private provider. [32501/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The proposed new Government Data Centre will be a purpose-built facility owned and operated by Government. It will be built on state land and will be operated and managed by the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine on behalf of the state.



The new Government Data Centre will be developed at the Government's Backweston Laboratory Campus in Celbridge, Co. Kildare, which currently comprises various facilities for the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the State Laboratory.

This project is part of the Government's ICT strategy which is focused on creating ICT shared services to support integration across the wider public service in order to drive efficiency, standardisation, consolidation, reduction in duplication and cost control. The Data Centre will provide the foundation and platform on which our digital reforms and transformations will be built.

The objective of the Government Data Centre is to deliver high-quality Data Centre facilities which are fit for purpose and are capable of meeting the Government's requirements now and in the future. In doing so it will support and enable the Civil Service Renewal 2030 Strategy, the Public Service Data Strategy and the Government's 2021 Digital Strategy and thereby provide a much better experience of Government Services for the people of Ireland.

### **Electric Vehicles**

101. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of electric or hybrid vehicles purchased by his Department in 2020 and to date in 2021, respectively in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32858/21]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department does not own or lease any vehicles.

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

102. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the criteria for the Fáilte Ireland outdoor dining scheme [32155/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The development and administration of the Outdoor Dining Enhancement Scheme, including eligibility criteria, are operational matters for Fáilte Ireland. Accordingly, I have asked the agency to provide further information directly to the Deputy. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

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

103. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the reason County Longford was excluded from the outdoor dining scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32156/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The Outdoor Dining Enhancement Scheme comprises of two parts, which are being delivered in partnership between Fáilte Ireland and Local Authorities across the country. Although neither I nor my Department has any role in the development and administration of this scheme, Fáilte Ireland has advised that County Longford has not been excluded from this scheme.

With regard to Part One of the Scheme, I understand that it provides funding to assist indi-

vidual tourism and hospitality businesses develop or increase their own outdoor seating capacity and is being administered and evaluated directly by each Local Authority.

As regards funding allocated under Part Two of the Scheme, this is intended to enable Local Authorities develop permanent outdoor public dining spaces in towns and urban centres, similar to those that exist in various European cities. I am advised that each Local Authority can apply to Fáilte Ireland for up to €200,000 under this element of the scheme, which is being administered and evaluated directly by Fáilte Ireland.

### National Library

104. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if the office of the chief herald which is attached to the genealogy and heraldry division of the National Library of Ireland has recently purchased seven letters written by a person (details supplied) between 1883 and 1885; the price paid for this acquisition; the reason for this purchase; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32206/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The Office of the Chief Herald is an integral part of the National Library of Ireland (NLI). The NLI adds to its collections each year through donations and purchases. It purchased the letters referred to by the Deputy and this has been catalogued and is listed on the NLI website (Manuscript No. 51212 and website link <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000835384> )

The letters were purchased at auction last year in London and had a total cost for the lot of £49,856 sterling. The NLI considers that the letters from the individual referred to by the Deputy are a valuable addition to the National Library's collection. I have been informed that early letters by this individual are rarely offered for sale. These particular letters had only recently come to light and unlike much of this individual's correspondence, the letters were previously unpublished.

The NLI intends to have the letters digitally imaged and made available to the public online.

### Artists' Remuneration

105. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of the implementation of the Arts Recovery Task Force recommendation that the Government pilot a universal basic income scheme for a three year period in the arts, culture, audio-visual and live performance and events sectors; the supports being put in place to support individuals in the arts and entertainment sector; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32285/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce report *Life Worth Living*, was published in November 2020 and made ten recommendations for the sector. The recommendations included a proposal to pilot a basic income scheme for a three-year period in the arts, culture, audiovisual and live performance and events sectors.

I was delighted that as part of the National Economic Recovery Plan launched on June 1st, I secured agreement from Government for a Basic Income Guarantee pilot scheme for artists. The Government recognises that bold steps are necessary for our invaluable and much treasured

arts community to come back stronger than ever before.

I have recently established an Oversight Group with the remit of addressing the outstanding recommendations of the *Life Worth Living* report. The membership of the Group is drawn from Departments and Agencies which have the ability and wherewithal to make appropriate progress on the outstanding recommendations, including the Basic Income Guarantee pilot. The Oversight Group held its first meeting on May 27th and is being chaired by my Department and joined by representatives of the Departments of Finance, Social Protection, Public Expenditure and Reform as well as Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The Directors of the Arts Council and Screen Ireland are also members and as well as a representative of the County and City Managers' Association.

I have asked the Oversight Group to prioritise the manner in which a Basic Income Guarantee pilot scheme for artists could be delivered. As work on the pilot scheme is just getting underway it is too early to be definitive about the exact nature of the pilot scheme at this point. The Oversight Group is expected to report to me by the end of July.

### Departmental Programmes

106. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will increase the funding available to the current round of the sports capital programme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [31397/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Sports Capital and Equipment Programme (SCEP) is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country.

The 2020 round of the SCEP closed for applications on Monday 1st March, 2021. By the closing date, 3,106 applications were submitted seeking over €200m in funding. This is the highest number of applications ever received. The scoring system and assessment manual for the 2020 round has now been finalised and is available at [www.sportscapitalprogramme.ie](http://www.sportscapitalprogramme.ie). Given the record number of applications and the detailed information contained in each application, the assessment process will take a number of months to complete. No decision on allocations will be made until all applications have been assessed. While a minimum of €40m is available, any additional resources will be considered in the context of the review of the National Development Plan and an analysis of the likely drawdown demands in the coming years for older SCEP grants.

### Departmental Programmes

107. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the expected timeframe for the processing and finalisation of the 2021 sports capital grant applications; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32300/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Sports Capital and Equipment Programme (SCEP) is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country.

The 2020 round of the SCEP closed for applications on Monday 1st March, 2021. By the

closing date, 3,106 applications were submitted seeking over €200m in funding. This is the highest number of applications ever received.

The scoring system and assessment manual for the 2020 round has now been finalised and is available at [www.sportscapitalprogramme.ie](http://www.sportscapitalprogramme.ie). Given the record number of applications and the detailed information contained in each application, the assessment process will take a number of months to complete. It is envisaged that allocations for applications for sports equipment-only will be made first during the Summer with allocations to other capital projects announced before the end of the year. At least €40 million is being made available for allocation and local and regional allocations will be announced at the same time. As soon as this process is complete all applicants will be informed of the outcome of the assessment of their application.

### **Electric Vehicles**

108. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the number of electric or hybrid vehicles purchased by her Department in 2020 and to date in 2021, respectively in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32860/21]

**Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin):** As I have previously advised the House in my replies to Parliamentary Question No. 429 of 28th April ([https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2021-04-28/429/#pq\\_429](https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2021-04-28/429/#pq_429)), and Parliamentary Question No. 578 of 24th March

([https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2021-03-24/578/#pq\\_578](https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2021-03-24/578/#pq_578)), my department does not operate any vehicles.

### **Commercial Rates**

109. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the estimated cost of extending the commercial rates waiver until the end of September 2021. [32261/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** As part of the Government's Economic Recovery Plan on 1 June, I announced an extension of the current commercial rates waiver for an additional 3 months, covering July to September. The waiver is intended to continue supporting eligible businesses as they adjust to the reopening of the economy and recover from the impact of the pandemic. The businesses eligible for the waiver in quarter 2 that continue to be eligible for the waiver for quarter three include:

- retail;
- hospitality including hotels, pubs and restaurants, leisure and entertainment;
- personal services such as hairdressers and barbers; and
- health services.

It is estimated that the extension of the waiver in the third quarter of 2021 will cost €160 million.

## Housing Provision

110. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if there can be interdepartmental coordination between his Department and the appropriate Department to prevent situations such as the case of a person (details supplied) occurring again; and if he will issue a policy directive or seek a bureaucratic solution that would prevent this from occurring again in the future. [32372/21]

122. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the supports that are available for a person (details supplied) who has been on a waiting list for local authority housing for 17 years. [32324/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 110 and 122 together.

Applications for social housing support are assessed by the relevant local authority, in accordance with the eligibility and need criteria set down in section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the associated Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011, as amended.

If a household meets the eligibility and need criteria, it qualifies for the suite of social housing supports, including HAP, and is placed on the housing list to be considered for the allocation of suitable tenancies in accordance with the authority's allocation scheme. It is a matter for the local authority to determine the most appropriate form of social housing support for that household in the administrative area of that local authority.

The allocation of local authority dwellings, including the prioritisation of certain households, is a matter for the local authority concerned, in accordance with their allocation scheme made under section 22 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and associated Regulations. This legislation requires all local authorities, as a reserved function, to make an allocation scheme determining the order of priority to be accorded in the allocation of dwellings to households qualified for social housing support and to households approved for a transfer, the allocation of which would, in the opinion of the authority, meet the accommodation needs and requirements of the households.

It is the local authority which assesses housing applicants, taking into account factors such as the condition and affordability of existing accommodation, medical and compassionate grounds, etc. The authority then prioritises the needs of approved applicants in accordance with its allocation scheme.

Decisions on the allocation of social housing support are a matter solely for the local authority concerned. Each application must be considered on its own merits and the individual circumstances taken into account.

As Minister I am precluded by housing legislation from intervening in relation to the procedures followed, or decisions made, by local authorities in the provision of social housing support in individual cases.

Responsibility for the development and provision of services to support victims of domestic violence rests with my colleague the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and I understand that the delivery of these services is managed by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency.

In terms of housing services, in 2017, my Department issued policy and procedural guid-

ance to local authorities relating to the role they can play to assist victims of domestic violence. The guidance is also a useful reference for service providers working in the sector, highlighting where they can be of greatest assistance to their clients, covering a range of scenarios that may arise for victims of domestic violence currently in receipt of social housing support and those seeking social housing supports. These include provisions whereby a household may transfer out of their existing tenancy and into a new tenancy agreement with the local authority or they may access an independent tenancy in the private rented sector utilising the various housing supports offered by the State.

### **Local Authorities**

111. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the funding assigned to Meath County Council that was returned to the Exchequer in 2019 and 2020, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32420/21]

112. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the funding assigned to Westmeath County Council that was returned to the Exchequer in 2019 and 2020, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32421/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 111 and 112 together.

The funding system that applies to local authorities in Ireland is a complex one, as those authorities derive their income from a variety of sources including commercial rates, charges for goods and services and funding from Central Government including my Department but also other government departments and state agencies. Most of the funding from Central Government to local authorities must be used for specified services. These can be grouped into 5 broad programme categories: housing, transport, recreational, education and environment.

My Department has a wide and diverse business agenda, covering a broad range of functions, including local authority housing, voluntary housing, homeless services, estate regeneration, energy efficiency retrofitting, housing grants, rural water schemes, urban renewal/regeneration, and fire services. In order to achieve its business objectives, the Department allocates significant resources to an extensive range of organisations, including local authorities, dedicated agencies, and other bodies; some allocations, depending on the programmes concerned, are made on a national or other non-county basis in the form of grant funding.

Grant funding is provided primarily on the basis of vouched expenditure, as opposed to specific up front annual allocations, once all necessary requirements as detailed in grant assistance schemes are met by the bodies/organisations concerned and that appropriate systems and procedures are in place to ensure the exercise of proper financial controls. Accordingly, the circumstances of funding being returned to the Exchequer do not arise.

*Question No. 112 answered with Question No. 111.*

### **Quarrying Sector**

113. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the specific planning enforcement measures in place with respect to the quarry sector; if he plans to introduce new planning and enforcement measures; and if he will make a state-

ment on the matter. [32221/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** Under planning legislation, enforcement of unauthorised development is a matter for the relevant planning authority, which can take action if a development does not have the required permission, or where the terms of a permission have not been met.

There are extensive enforcement provisions provided for in Part VIII of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended (the Act), with a view to ensuring that works pertaining to permitted developments are carried out in accordance with the planning permission granted and any associated conditions and that no unauthorised development takes place, including in relation to quarries. In addition, any person or a planning authority may seek a court order under section 160 of the Act in relation to unauthorised development with a view to ensuring that the development works in question are not carried out or continued.

Provision for the recoupment of costs arising from enforcement action taken by planning authorities is provided for under section 154 of the Act. Section 154(5)(b) provides that an enforcement notice shall require that such steps as may be specified in the notice be taken within a specified period, including, where appropriate, the removal, demolition or alteration of any structure and the discontinuance of any use and, in so far as is practicable, the restoration of the land to its condition prior to the commencement of the development.

Section 154(5)(c) further provides that if the steps specified in the enforcement notice are not taken within a specified period (not being more than 6 months), the planning authority may enter on the land and take such steps and may recover any expenses reasonably incurred by them in that behalf.

Furthermore, section 154(5)(d) provides that an enforcement notice shall require the person or persons served with the notice to refund to the planning authority the costs and expenses reasonably incurred by the authority, including costs incurred in respect of the remuneration and other expenses of employees, consultants and advisers.

Section 154(7) further provides that if required, any expenses reasonably incurred by a planning authority may be recovered as a simple contract debt in any court of competent jurisdiction from the person or persons on whom the notice was served. Alternatively, the costs incurred by a planning authority may be secured by charging the land under the Registration of Title Act, 1964, or where the person on whom the enforcement notice was served is the owner of the land, an instrument vesting the ownership of the land in the authority subject to a right of redemption by the owner within five years.

Section 156 sets out the penalties that may be applied in relation to non-compliance with specific sections of the Act. In this connection, 156(1) provides that a person who is guilty of an offence shall be liable, on conviction on indictment, to a fine not exceeding £10,000,000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 2 years, or to both. It further provides that a person who is guilty of an offence shall be liable, on summary conviction, to a fine not exceeding £5,000, or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months, or to both. Under section 156(2) of the Act, where a person is convicted of an offence and there is a continuation by him/her of the offence after his/her conviction, he or she shall be guilty of a further offence on every day on which the contravention continues and for each such offence shall be liable.

Accordingly, as indicated, there are already extensive enforcement powers available to planning authorities in relation to non-compliance with planning legislation. This planning legislation is in compliance with EU law and applies to all forms of development, including the operation of quarries. Under section 157(4)(AA), enforcement action may be taken against

unauthorised quarrying at any time.

Under section 30 of the Act, I am specifically precluded from exercising any power or control in relation to any particular case, including an enforcement issue, with which a planning authority or An Bord Pleanála is or may be concerned.

While I do not envisage that any further actions are required in relation to planning enforcement at this time, I will continue to keep this matter under review.

### **Construction Industry**

114. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the new measures that are required to ensure the construction sector is regulated in view of the issues that have arisen in terms of building defects with both pyrite and Mica; the initiatives he plans to take; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32222/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the very stressful circumstances which the owners and residents of buildings face when defects occur in their homes.

I believe that the ongoing building control reform agenda, with its many initiatives, already provides a comprehensive roadmap for embedding a culture of real compliance within the construction industry. The reform agenda includes:

- Amendments made to the Building Control Regulations;
- Establishment of a shared services National Building Control Management Project; and
- The ongoing development of new legislation through the Building Control (Construction Industry Register Ireland) Bill

Specifically relating to product legislation, since 2013, the Construction Products Directive (CPD)- 89/106/EEC has been replaced by the Construction Products Regulation (EU) No 305/2011 (CPR). It sets out rules for the marketing of construction products in the EU. Where a construction product covered by a harmonised standard is being placed on the EU market, the CPR requires the manufacturer to draw up a 'declaration of performance' and affix a 'CE' marking to the product. In order to do so, manufacturers must test and declare the performance of their construction products using a common technical language prescribed in the harmonised standard.

The manufacturer is responsible for compliance with the Construction Products Regulation (CPR) and in particular for the Declaration of Performance/CE marking of the construction product he/she is placing on the market, having full knowledge of the raw material (as is legally required by the CPR via the relevant harmonised European Standards) and having regard to the end product's suitability for use in construction works in accordance with the relevant Standard Recommendations published by the National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI).

Under the European Union (Construction Products) Regulations 2013 (S.I. No.225 of 2013), each of the building control authorities have been designated as the principal market surveillance authorities for construction products that fall within the scope of the CPR, within their administrative areas. In addition, Dublin City Council has been appointed as a competent authority for the carrying out of market surveillance functions across the country and has created a Market Surveillance Unit within Dublin City Council-National Building Control Office, (DCC-



NBCO). Building control authorities will liaise with DCC-NBCO national market surveillance unit to support compliance with the CPR and to determine appropriate action on enforcement matters, as they arise.

The National market surveillance programme 2021 provides specific details on the market surveillance of construction products and outlines a market surveillance campaign led by DCC-NBCO, which has recently commenced, to perform risk assessments of selected quarrying and pit operations, follow-up inspections, sampling and testing as appropriate to ensure compliance with the CPR.

Separately, the Programme for Government sets out a number of commitments in respect of the important policy area of building defects and provides for an examination of defects in housing, having regard to the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing report, “Safe as Houses”.

In this context, I established a working group to examine defects in housing. The group’s terms of reference have recently been adopted and include:

1. Examine defects in housing having regard to the recommendations in Item 4 “*Addressing the legacy of bad building and poor regulation*” in Chapter 4 of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government report - ‘*Safe as Houses? A Report on Building Standards, Building Controls and Consumer Protection*’ .

2. Establish the nature of significant, wide-spread fire safety, structural safety and water ingress defects in purpose built apartment buildings, including duplexes, constructed between 1991 – 2013 in Ireland through consultation with affected homeowners, homeowner representative organisations, owners’ management companies, relevant managing agents, public representatives, local authorities, product manufacturers, building professionals, industry stakeholders, insurance providers, mortgage providers and other relevant parties. Including such matters as;

- Identification and description of defect,
- Nature of defect – design, product, workmanship,
- Non-compliance with building regulations or actual damage,
- Severity/risk to life or serviceability of dwelling,
- Period of construction affected,
- Type of dwelling affected,
- Location of dwellings affected.

3. Establish the scale of the issue – estimate number of dwellings affected by the defects identified including those already remediated.

4. Consider a methodology for the categorisation of defects and the prioritisation of remedial action.

- In the case of defects with fire safety implications, consider how the framework for enhancing fire safety in dwellings can be applied to mitigate the risks arising from fire safety defects pending the remediation of defects and the *Code of Practice for Fire Safety Assessment of Premises and Buildings*, which is currently being developed by National Directorate of Fire and Emergency Management.

5. Suggest mechanisms for resolving defects, in the context of the legal rights, duties and obligations of developers, builders, building professionals, insurers, mortgage providers, building control authorities, fire authorities, owners' management companies, owner occupiers, renters and landlords, including:

- Technical options for the remediation of dwellings,
- Efficient means of carrying out work,
- individual dwellings or whole building approach
- routine maintenance/refurbishment or remediation
- Structures or delivery channels needed to facilitate resolution – advice and support.

6. Evaluate the potential cost of technical remediation options.

7. Pursue options on possible financial solutions to effect a resolution, in line with the Programme for Government commitment to identify options for those impacted by defects to access low-cost, long-term finance.

8. To report to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the Examination of Defects in Housing.

### **Defective Building Materials**

115. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the cost to date for pyrite remediation; the projected cost into the future; the average remediation cost; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32223/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The pyrite remediation scheme is a scheme of “last resort” applicable to dwellings, which are subject to significant damage attributable to pyritic heave. The full conditions for eligibility under the Scheme are available on the Pyrite Board’s website at [www.pyriteboard.ie](http://www.pyriteboard.ie).

€20m was provided under Budget 2021 to cover the implementation of the pyrite remediation scheme in 2021. This allocation will facilitate the remediation of some 300 additional dwellings in 2021 and is a clear signal of the continuing importance attached by Government to addressing the issue of significant pyritic damage in private dwellings. This will bring to approx. €166m the total funding provided under the scheme since 2014.

The latest figures available indicate that 2,889 applications have been received under Scheme and, so far, 2,413 dwellings have been included. A further 108 applications have been validated and referred to the Housing Agency for the Assessment and Verification Process, 108 applications are at the initial Application and Validation Process and 260 applications were not successful. Of the 2,413 dwellings included, the works in respect of 2,148 are complete with the rest at various stages of progress.

It is projected that approx. €62.5m will be required under the scheme between 2022 and 2026. Projected expenditure is under constant review and is updated regularly. It is unlikely that applications will cease entirely post end-2026 but its expected they will reduce at a gradual rate over time.

The average all in cost of remediation of dwellings under the Scheme ranges from €65,000

to €70,000 per dwelling.

### Quarrying Sector

116. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of quarries that are operating without the benefit of planning permission; if he has reviewed this with all planning authorities; if so, when; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32224/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke):** Planning statistics are compiled by each planning authority on an annual basis for collation and publication on my Department's website, at the following link:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/service/9e4ee-get-planning-statistics/>.

The data collected relates to the total number of applications and decisions for all developments that require planning permission, broken down by year and planning authority. However, the data is not broken down by reason for the grant or refusal of permission, including in respect of quarries. Furthermore, the data does not include quarries that are operating without the benefit of planning permission. Unauthorised quarries are an enforcement matter for the relevant planning authorities and information in this regard may be sought directly from the individual planning authorities.

In addition, the Central Statistics Office (CSO), as the national statistical office, compiles and makes available detailed data on a number of planning related issues including permissions granted and completions by development type and county. Data is available at the following link on the CSO website: <https://www.cso.ie/en/statistics/construction/planningpermissions/>.

### Real Estate Investment Trusts

117. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of residential properties purchased by real estate investment trusts by county in each of the years 2013 to 2020, in tabular form. [32243/21]

118. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of new residential property units constructed by real estate investment trusts by county in each of the years 2013 to 2020, in tabular form. [32244/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 117 and 118 together.

My Department does not collect data in relation to the ownership or construction of individual housing units purchased and sold in the housing market.

I understand that data published by market commentators indicates that approximately 15,500 units were owned by investment trusts at the end of 2020, making up less than 1% of over 2 million homes in Ireland.

*Question No. 118 answered with Question No. 117.*

### Local Authorities

119. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of housing units by type, such as, house, apartment, flat and so on, that are owned by each local authority in each of the years 1991 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [32245/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** In accordance with the provisions of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) 2009, local authorities are responsible for the management and of housing stock in their ownership and my Department does not hold the details requested by the Deputy.

Statistics relating to social housing stock have been published by the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) in their Performance Indicator Reports. These reports provide a range of information in relation to social housing stock in local authority owned properties. Reports for 2014 to 2019 are available on the NOAC website at the following link:

<https://noac.ie/?search=advancedPublications&categories=Performance+Indicator+Reports&year=>

### **Local Authorities**

120. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of housing units by type, that is, house, apartment, flat and so on, that are leased from private entities by each local authority in each of the years 1991 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [32246/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** While the Government's objective is to focus strongly on local authority led build activity, long term leasing is an important option available to local authorities to supplement delivery and secure high quality social housing on a long term basis.

The social housing leasing programme, which began in 2009, allows local authorities and approved housing bodies to lease suitable properties from private owners for periods of up to 25 years.

Local authorities lease dwellings taking account of local need, the suitability of dwellings, sustainable communities considerations and value for money. These properties are allocated to households on the social housing waiting list. As such, the type and size of dwelling leased, and the allocation of those dwellings, is a matter for the relevant local authority having regard to its most recent housing needs assessment.

Data on social housing leasing delivery, funded by my Department, in respect of all local authorities to end Q1 2021 is published on my Department's website at the following link: <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordble/overall-social-housing-provision>.

### **Local Authorities**

121. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the details of any or all proposals from local authorities to proceed with housing schemes which cost €6 million or less and do not require Departmental approval by local authority in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32304/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** All social housing projects, like all publicly funded construction projects, must comply with the Government's Public Spending Code and Capital Works Management Framework and therefore require prior approval by my Department.

The table below provides data on social housing projects under €6 million submitted by local authorities under the Single Stage approval process.

Local Authority	Projects	Units
Carlow	14	40
Clare	4	8
Cork County	7	15
Donegal	5	12
Fingal	1	11
Galway County	1	1
Kerry	5	10
Kildare	1	3
Kilkenny	4	10
Laois	4	10
Leitrim	3	9
Louth	6	16
Mayo	7	25
Meath	4	9
Monaghan	1	6
Sligo	1	1
South Dublin	1	2
Tipperary	2	7
Waterford	1	2
Wicklow	1	1

*Question No. 122 answered with Question No. 110.*

### Departmental Schemes

123. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the RAS scheme was discontinued; and if his attention has been drawn to the fact that recipients who had been receiving the payment for years, were not included on local authority housing lists but now as the payment has been axed they are in a situation in which they need social housing urgently but have to be added to the bottom of the list despite the fact that they technically have been in the support system for extended periods of time. [32326/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS) has not been discontinued and remains a significant part of the suite of social housing options currently available across the country. It has been an important contributor to social housing supply since its introduction on a pilot basis in 2005 and continues to be delivered by all local authorities, who source accommodation from the private market and Approved Housing Bodies.

Under the terms of RAS, local authorities retain the responsibility to source alternative accommodation for a household accommodated under the RAS scheme, should the dwelling that

the household is living in become unavailable. In such circumstances, it is a matter for the local authority to secure suitable alternative accommodation for the household. Another option is for households in RAS properties to source alternative accommodation themselves, independent of the local authority. Once the local authority is satisfied that proposed accommodation meets the needs of the household and conforms to standards for rental accommodation, the property may be brought into the RAS scheme.

The Housing Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2009 gives legislative recognition to rental accommodation availability agreements, which underpin RAS, as a form of social housing support. Consequently, since 1 April 2011, RAS tenants are considered to be in receipt of social housing support and should not generally remain on housing waiting lists for new applicants for social housing. Recognising that tenants housed through RAS prior to this change might have had reasonable expectations with regard to retaining access to traditional local authority rented accommodation, guidance issued from the Housing Agency in 2011 recommending that there should be a special transfer pathway for pre-2011 RAS tenants to other forms of social housing support. This arrangement effectively allowed those households to be designated as a ‘transfer’ applicant and to maintain their position for allocation as they had on the main waiting list.

All tenants allocated RAS accommodation post 1st April 2011 were informed at the time of offer and allocation that, as RAS tenants are considered to be in receipt of social housing support, their housing need is being met and that they will no longer remain on the main social housing waiting list.

However, it was recommended that allocation schemes also provide a ‘transfer pathway’ for new RAS tenants, whereby households in RAS have access to the transfer list in the same way as tenants in local authority accommodation. Where a vacant property arises, it is a matter for individual housing authorities, in accordance with their allocation schemes, to determine whether the allocation is made to a household on the main waiting list, or to a transfer applicant, such as a household from RAS, and the method of such allocation. It is open to housing authorities to specify in their allocation schemes the proportion of allocations which will be reserved for transfers, and within this, how many may be reserved for households seeking transfers to other forms of social housing support.

### **Local Authorities**

**124. Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the directives that have been issued to local authorities in relation to housing inspections as restrictions across society are lifting. [32327/21]

**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 safety of gas, oil and electrical supplies. With very limited exemptions, these apply to all private rented accommodation. All landlords have a legal obligation to ensure that their rented properties, regardless of tenancy type, comply with these regulations. Responsibility for the enforcement of the Regulations rests with the relevant local authority.

Given the need for inspectors to enter tenants’ homes, Covid-19 pandemic restrictions have impacted on the inspection of all rented dwellings. The City and County Management Association’s (CCMA) Local Authority Resilience and Recovery Plan for living with Covid-19 (October 2020) and its subsequent Local Authority Services Frameworks for Future Covid-19 Pandemic Response (January and May 2021) do not permit rental inspections. This is in order

to protect tenants, landlords and rental inspectors.

The CCMA Business Continuity Working Group met recently to discuss the further phased re-opening of local authority services in line with the most recent government guidance and planned easing of restrictions. Housing inspection services were discussed by the group. Following the Business Continuity Working Group meeting, a draft updated version of the CCMA Local Authority Services Framework for Future COVID-19 Pandemic Response document was sent to the CCMA for consideration. Its approval is awaited. Once approved, this framework will be circulated to all local authorities.

### Departmental Budgets

125. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the funds from the social housing budget returned unspent to the Exchequer from his Department in each of the years 2017 to 2020, in tabular form. [32490/21]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department's Appropriation Accounts which are published by the Comptroller and Auditor General set out the full details of expenditure for the relevant years and can be found at <https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/> by clicking on "Appropriation Accounts".

Summary details of the Allocations and Final outturn of expenditure for the years 2017-2020 are set out below:

Vote 34 - DHLGH	REV Allocation	Final Outturn	Deferred Surrender – capital carry-over	Amount Surrendered to Exchequer	Amount related to Programme A - Housing
2020	€5,444m	€5,217m	€214m	€12.5m	€2.7m
2019	€3,937m	€3,897m	€33.5m	€6.5m	€0
2018	€3,331m	€3,317m	€0	€13m	€0
2017	€2,027m	€2,023m	€0	€4m	€0

Under Section 91 of the Finance Act, 2004, all or part of any unspent appropriations for capital supply services may be carried over for spending in the following year.

In 2019, unspent capital balances from the Urban Renewal & Regeneration Fund and the Land Development Agency amounting to €33.5m was carried over into 2020. The balance of €6.5m was surrendered to the Exchequer.

In 2020, as a result of the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on the construction sector there was a total surplus amounting to some €226.5m arising from unspent allocations in respect of the capital elements of Programmes A (Housing), B (Water), D (Planning) and F (Heritage) of which €214m was carried forward to 2021 while the remaining balance of €12.5m was surrendered to the Exchequer.

### Electric Vehicles

126. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of electric or hybrid vehicles purchased by his Department in 2020 and to date in 2021, respectively in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32856/21]

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

The information requested by the Deputy in respect of my Department is set out in the following table.

Year	Electric Vehicles Purchased	Hybrid Vehicles Purchased
2020	2	0
2021	0	0

### Covid-19 Pandemic

127. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a person (details supplied) would need to enter mandatory hotel quarantine on return to Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32135/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The current requirement to quarantine for 14 days in a designated facility is designed to ensure that further new Variants Of Concern are not imported to Ireland. The aim of Mandatory Hotel Quarantine is to protect the progress which has been made in Ireland in suppressing Covid-19, and the achievements of the vaccination programme which is currently being rolled out. Guidance on all the requirements and measures in place for persons arriving in Ireland following international travel is available on [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie).

All passengers travelling from Designated States must pre-book a place in Mandatory Hotel Quarantine prior to departure. Passengers must produce evidence of this booking to board flights to Ireland and also present this evidence to Immigration officials on arrival. This applies even if only transiting through a Designated State and even if remaining airside.

The Department of Foreign Affairs is not the responsible authority on the operation of Mandatory Hotel Quarantine, which is a matter for the Department of Health. There is an option to lodge an appeal on arrival based on personal circumstances and this will be heard within 24 hours. However, this is only granted in very limited circumstances.

The Department continues to strongly encourage citizens to consult with the latest travel advice and Government guidance before undertaking any travel to or from Ireland at this time and continues to advise citizens that the list of Designated States is subject to change at short notice from the Department of Health.

The Department of Health has a Mandatory Hotel Quarantine helpline which can advise in more detail for exemptions and proof for exemptions. The helpline is open Monday – Friday 9am- 5pm +353 1 613 1744.

More information on Mandatory Hotel Quarantine and Designated States can also be found on the [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie) website.

### Human Rights

128. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the death of a person (details supplied); and if he will raise this matter with his EU colleagues and at the United Nations. [32316/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I note with concern reports regarding an outbreak of Covid-19 in Jau prison in Bahrain and reports of the death of Mr Hu-



sain Barakat. Ireland urges all States to safeguard the human rights of prisoners and detainees, including provision of healthcare services, as set out in the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, also known as the Mandela Rules. Respect for human rights is an integral part of Ireland's foreign policy and we consistently seek to raise our concerns on human rights issues through the most appropriate and effective channels. Our active participation at the UN Human Rights Council is particularly important in that regard. Ireland has raised the human rights issues in Bahrain at the Human Rights Council in the form of national statements and through support to EU Statements. Ireland also engages on the issue of human rights in Bahrain through the European Union in other fora. At the most recent EU-Bahrain Human Rights Dialogue in February 2021, issues of concern were raised by the EU including rule of law, prison conditions, right to a fair trial, freedom of expression, freedom of association, death penalty, torture and the impact of Covid-19 on the human rights situation.

Ireland will continue to monitor developments in Bahrain, and to call on the Bahraini Government to deliver on its stated commitment to make progress in relation to human rights.

### Electric Vehicles

129. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of electric or hybrid vehicles purchased by his Department in 2020 and to date in 2021, respectively in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32850/21]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Department of Foreign Affairs purchases motor vehicles to facilitate the functioning and operations of Headquarters and its Missions abroad. The Department is committed to procuring vehicles with a reduced environmental impact throughout their life-cycle. Under the Department's official vehicle management policy, and in line with our Green Foreign Ministry policy, new and replacement vehicle purchases must now comply with our objective of minimising our carbon footprint. Factors like pollutant emissions, fuel efficiency and noise levels are taken into account when evaluating vehicle specifications. The option of procuring electric vehicles is considered initially. Following that, the consideration of hybrid options is evaluated. However, it should be noted that some of our Missions operate in difficult environments where security, road infrastructure and health and safety issues will be a significant factor when deciding on an appropriate official vehicle.

The number of electric or hybrid vehicles purchased in 2020 and to date in 2021 is detailed below:

Year	Number of Electric or Hybrid Vehicles Purchased
2020	8
2021 to date	2

### Naval Service

130. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the number of enlisted and non-enlisted personnel currently under active service within the Naval Service. [32149/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The military authorities advise that, as of 30th April 2021, the latest date for which such data is available, the strength (whole time equivalent) of the Naval Service was 895 personnel.

This is comprised of 162 Officers and 733 enlisted personnel.

**Electric Vehicles**

131. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Defence the number of electric or hybrid vehicles purchased by his Department in 2020 and to date in 2021, respectively in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32838/21]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The acquisition of new equipment and the upgrading of equipment for the Defence Forces remains a clear focus for the Defence Organisation. Future equipment priorities for the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service are considered in the context of the White Paper on Defence as part of the capability development and equipment priorities planning process.

In this context the principal aim over the period of the White Paper is to replace and upgrade, as required, existing capabilities in order to retain a flexible response for a wide range of operational requirements at home and overseas. Budget 2021 provides a Capital allocation of €131m for investment in Defence equipment and barracks infrastructure and will enable continued investment in major equipment platforms such as Defence Forces vehicle fleet. The increased capital funding for 2021 builds on increased levels of capital expenditure totalling €392m over the years 2018 – 2020.

Certain purchasing is carried out by the Defence Forces directly under delegation of financial responsibility which permits the Defence Forces to procure a wide range of goods and services directly, this includes the purchasing of non-armoured vehicles.

I am advised by the military authorities that the Defence Forces vehicle fleet currently consists of approximately 1,700 individual vehicles of different types and configurations. Of this number there are currently forty one (41) electric powered vehicles (EVs) and three (3) hybrid vehicles. Thirty of these vehicles were purchased in the last 2 years with 8 more to be delivered later this year.

The table below gives the full breakdown of the forty four vehicles by vehicle type and year of purchase.

**Table 1: Breakdown of Defence Forces electric and hybrid vehicles by vehicle type and date of purchase for the years in question**

Year of Purchase	EV - Saloon	EV - Buggy
2020	8	11
2021	8	1
Total	16	12

The Defence Forces maintain two fleets of vehicles; the military fleet and the administrative fleet. The military fleet, which consists of military specific vehicles such as armoured vehicles, trucks and off-road SUVs, comprises approximately 55% of the fleet. The administrative fleet are vehicles that can be purchased commercially such as saloon, stores vehicles and minibuses. They comprise approximately 45% of the Defence Forces fleet.

In line with Government policy in relation to the Clean Vehicle Directive, the Defence Forces are committed to procuring vehicles that have reduced carbon emissions.

Due to the specific nature and requirements of the military fleet of vehicles and the locations where they are likely to operate, these vehicles are Internal Combustion Engine (ICE) type and will be replaced, as required, with fossil fuel ICE vehicles for the reasons outlined above. The Defence Forces, however, endeavours to replace these ICE vehicles with more energy efficient

models where possible. For example, the new SUV and Troop Carrying Vehicle (TCV) fleets will be replaced with EURO 6 compliant engines which will result in a 50% reduction in emissions compared to the older EURO 3 engines which they replace.

The Defence Forces has committed to replacing the administrative fleet with energy efficient (green vehicles) as the technology allows. To date the investment in energy efficient vehicles as outlined in Table 1 above amounts to €1.2m inclusive of VAT. The Defence Forces has committed to spend a minimum of 6% of the vehicle replacement budget on EV starting in 2020 and a minimum of 8% in 2021, with a commitment to increase investment by a minimum of 2% of budget each subsequent year. Already in 2021 the Defence Forces have taken delivery of eight (8) EV saloons and an electric buggy. A further eight (8) EV stores vehicles have been ordered with delivery expected by year end.

The Corps of Engineers have also invested in supporting infrastructure with the installation of 19 EV chargers across 16 Defence Forces locations to sustain the enlargement of the Defence Forces Electric Vehicle fleet into the future.

I am satisfied that, with these new acquisitions and the planning for future clean vehicle procurements, the Defence Forces will continue to have the necessary modern and effective range of equipment available to them in order to fulfil all roles assigned to them by Government.

### **School Transport**

132. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Education if she will approve the reinstatement of a school bus service at a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32207/21]

**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 complete the application and payment process on time will be accommodated on school transport services for the 2021/22 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.

I can confirm that there has been no instruction from my Department to Bus Éireann to remove the service in question. The closing date for applications for school transport was Friday, 30th April. In line with normal practice, routes for the 2021/2022 school year will be planned

and organised over the summer months.

### **Departmental Programmes**

133. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if the 2021 summer provision programme as in other years previously allows for children in special schools to make up the additional 20 hours with home-based tuition in which the school programme is only two weeks 20 hours. [32174/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The Government has approved the provision of significantly expanded summer education programmes for pupils with complex special educational needs and those at greatest risk of educational disadvantage, as a COVID-19 pandemic response measure, for summer 2021.

This is an incredibly important Government decision, which ensures that for first time all primary and post primary schools have the opportunity to provide summer programmes for students with complex needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage.

The total funding available to provide the programme is up to €40 million, a one hundred per cent increase on the allocation for summer provision in 2020.

The programmes for mainstream students in primary and post-primary schools are new programmes for 2021, building upon previous summer programmes for pupils with complex special educational needs and those in provided in DEIS schools last year.

Where a school offers a school based programme, it is not open to any student of that school to access the home based programme. This is in line with the approach last year.

Children participating in a 2 week school based programme receive in excess of 40 hours tuition which is the maximum that can be availed of in the 4 week home-based programme.

### **Health and Safety**

134. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Education the steps she has taken to address the situation of intimidation of parents pupils and staff at the gates of a school (details supplied) by those dealing drugs there in the morning and as children are going home; and if she will commit the necessary resources to ensure that children can go to school and be in school safely including additional CCTV and other security measures. [32193/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The school authority is responsible for the Health & Safety of Children in their care, this would also apply to staff or parents using the school or its grounds.

The safety issues mentioned by the school should be brought to the attention of the local Garda Crime Prevention Officer who should be invited to visit the school and prepare a report. The information in this report should be assessed by the school authority to determine what follow up actions are required. The school authority may email the report to [emergency\\_works@education.gov.ie](mailto:emergency_works@education.gov.ie) where it will be examined and advice will issue as to what, if any recommendations contained in the report fall under the scope of the Emergency Works Scheme.

### **School Accommodation**

135. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education the number of schools in County Cork that have made applications to transfer to a new site for the school. [32231/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I wish to advise the Deputy that there are 20 schools in County Cork included in my Department's school building programme where the building projects for these schools involves the construction of new school buildings on new sites.

Updates on the current status of these projects is available on the Department's website at [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie) and this information is updated regularly.

### **School Accommodation**

136. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if a secondary school is being considered at a location (details supplied). [32238/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the Deputy may be aware, in order to plan for school provision and analyse the relevant demographic data, my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and uses a Geographical Information System, using data from a range of sources, including Child Benefit and school enrolment data, to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise and where additional school accommodation is needed at primary and post-primary level.

The most recent analysis undertaken by my Department projects that over 60% of the 314 school planning areas at primary level have stable or decreasing projected enrolments for the period to 2024, whereas some 90% of the school planning areas at post-primary level are anticipated to have increased enrolments for the period to 2027.

The level of demand volume across school planning areas with an increasing net requirement ranges from small to medium increases that are likely to be accommodated by existing schools through to significant projected growth that may require additional provision. This Department's most recent projections indicate continued increasing demand for post primary school places in the Midleton\_Carrigtwohill school planning area.

Where data indicates that additional provision is required at primary or post primary level, the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may be provided through either one, or a combination of, the following:

- Utilising existing unused capacity within a school or schools,
- Extending the capacity of a school or schools,
- Provision of a new school or schools.

Following such an analysis, a new post primary school (Carrigtwohill Community College) was established to serve the Midleton\_Carrigtwohill school planning area in 2016. My Department currently has no plans to establish an additional new school in this school planning area, however, the requirement for school places will continue to be kept under review, particularly in light of the significant projected future growth in the population of Midleton. In this regard, my officials will continue to liaise with officials in Cork County Council in respect of the draft Cork County Development Plan 2022-2028 (currently at consultation stage), with a view to ensuring appropriate provision for potential future school accommodation needs in all areas of County Cork, including Midleton.

In addition, similar to the process adopted in advance of the current academic year, my Department is engaging with patron bodies, to identify particular capacity requirements for the forthcoming year(s) which may necessitate action including, where required, the provision of modular accommodation solutions.

### **School Transport**

137. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education the status of the review of the school transport scheme; when the steering group will complete its review; the frequency with which it has met; if the school transport system will be renewed before the start of the new school year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32278/21]

**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.

In October 2019, my predecessor announced a review of the school transport scheme with a view to taking a fresh look at the service and its broader effectiveness and sustainability. The review is being conducted to ensure that the school transport is fit for purpose and that it serves students and their families adequately.

It is planned that the Steering Group will report to me on an interim basis as the review progresses, with a view to presenting a final report later this year with recommendations on the future operation of the Department's School Transport Scheme.

The Steering Group will report to me initially on preliminary findings regarding eligibility, before moving to consider and report on broader issues such as the objectives of the scheme and the alignment of the scheme with other initiatives and wider Government policy. The Steering Group has recently reported to me with this preliminary interim report which is under consideration.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

138. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Education the plans she and her Department have for the safe return of schools for teachers and students for the next academic year in respect of indoor ventilation to combat the Covid-19 pandemic taking account of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment's recently published Work Safety Protocol; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32301/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Managing classroom ventilation is one of a number of prevention and control measures in place to ensure schools are safe.

Practical steps for the deployment of good ventilation practices was provided to the school system in the context of re-opening for September 2020. This guidance was reviewed and updated in November 2020 and in May 2021. This guidance is compatible with that in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment's recently published Work Safety Protocol

Schools were reminded of the importance of good ventilation as part of the phased re-opening of schools.

An expert group on ventilation was established to assess the role of ventilation in reducing transmission of Covid-19. The HPSC updated its guidance to reflect the work of this expert group. A Ventilation Working Group involving all relevant Departments (including Department of Education) was established by the Department of the Taoiseach to coordinate this work.

Previous issued guidance advised schools how to identify areas of poor ventilation and the deployment of these measures can be supplemented and enhanced by the use of CO2 monitors and can provide a useful general indication that areas/rooms may not be adequately ventilated and can enable occupants to become familiar with the impact of activities, outdoor weather and window openings on ventilation levels. CO2 monitors have been centrally tendered with delivery direct to schools over the coming months.

### School Transport

139. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education when families can expect to receive school bus fare refunds in lieu of the post-primary school closure from January to April 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32313/21]

**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.

The decision taken by the Government not to re-open schools on the 6th January 2021, followed by the subsequent phased re-opening, was taken in the interest of protecting our pupils, their families, teachers and those members of the wider community and is one of the many measures taken to support efforts to contain the spread of Covid-19.

Given that school transport services have not been available for part of the current school year, it has been decided that at the end of the current school year a refund for that period of closure will be issued to parents/guardians. The Department is currently engaging with Bus Éireann in considering how best to facilitate these refunds.

### School Transport

140. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Education if a post-primary school transport route (details supplied) will be extended with the capacity increased to meet demand; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32322/21]

**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 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.

Bus Éireann has confirmed that pupils who reside in the areas referred to by the Deputy are not eligible for transport under the terms of the scheme as they are not attending their nearest school/post primary centre.

Children who apply for transport but who are not eligible are considered for spare seats that may exist after eligible children have been facilitated; such seats are referred to as concessionary seats.

All school transport services are reviewed over the summer months. Arising from this, 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.

### **Capitation Grants**

141. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education the estimated full-year cost of increasing the capitation grant at primary and secondary level by 5%; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32368/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I understand the need for improved capitation funding and I am pleased that budget 2020 has been able to provide for a further 2.5% increase in standard capitation funding for primary schools that applied from the start of the 2020/21 school year. This builds on the 5% increase in capitation announced in budget 2019.

The combined increases given in 2019 and 2020 mean that circa 40% restoration will be achieved.

All schools have received the benefit of the capitation increases awarded to date. It is my intention to seek funding for further capitation increases in future budgets.

The estimated cost of increasing the capitation grant by 5% for primary and post-primary schools is €10.2m.

### **Pupil-Teacher Ratio**

142. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education the estimated full-year cost of reducing the pupil teacher ratio by two at primary level; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32369/21]

143. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education the estimated full-year cost of lowering primary school class sizes by two students; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32370/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 142 and



143 together.

At primary level, the annual staffing schedule determines the allocation of teachers to schools. For the current school year, it operates on a general average of 26 pupils to every 1 teacher (26:1). Budget 2021 has implemented a further 1 point reduction for the 2021/22 school year so that primary schools will be allocated teaching posts on an average basis of 1 classroom teacher for every 25 pupils. Lower thresholds apply to DEIS Urban Band 1 schools. In addition, there has been a three point reduction in the retention schedule, which will assist schools that would otherwise be at risk of losing teaching posts.

Each one point adjustment to the primary staffing schedule would cost approximately €14.5m annually.

The configuration of classes and the deployment of classroom teachers are done at local school level. The Department's guidance to schools is that the number of pupils in any class is kept as low as possible taking all relevant contextual factors into account (e.g. classroom accommodation, fluctuating enrolment etc.).

*Question No. 143 answered with Question No. 142.*

### **Schools Building Projects**

144. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Education the current status for a building project (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32375/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The project for the school referred to by the Deputy commenced on site in March 2021 and is progressing satisfactorily with a contract duration of approximately 6 months.

### **School Transport**

145. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Education the status of the steering group that was set up to tackle the issues within the school bus transport scheme; if its work was conclusive; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32383/21]

**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.

In October 2019, my predecessor announced a review of the school transport scheme with a view to taking a fresh look at the service and its broader effectiveness and sustainability. The review is being conducted to ensure that the school transport is fit for purpose and that it serves students and their families adequately.

It is planned that the Steering Group will report to me on an interim basis as the review progresses, with a view to presenting a final report later this year with recommendations on the

future operation of the Department's School Transport Scheme.

The Steering Group will report to me initially on preliminary findings regarding eligibility, before moving to consider and report on broader issues such as the objectives of the scheme and the alignment of the scheme with other initiatives and wider Government policy. The Steering Group has recently reported to me with this preliminary interim report which is under consideration.

### **School Transport**

146. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Education if the issue in relation to concessionary tickets has been addressed by the steering group set up to address the issues in the school bus transport scheme. [32384/21]

**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.

In October 2019, my predecessor announced a review of the school transport scheme with a view to taking a fresh look at the service and its broader effectiveness and sustainability. The review is being conducted to ensure that the school transport is fit for purpose and that it serves students and their families adequately.

It is planned that the Steering Group will report to me on an interim basis as the review progresses, with a view to presenting a final report later this year with recommendations on the future operation of the Department's School Transport Scheme.

The Steering Group will report to me initially on preliminary findings regarding eligibility, before moving to consider and report on broader issues such as the objectives of the scheme and the alignment of the scheme with other initiatives and wider Government policy. The Steering Group has recently reported to me with this preliminary interim report which is under consideration.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

147. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education if consideration has been given to vaccinating teachers who will be undertaking the July provision in summer 2021. [32440/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The new vaccination roll out schedule, which was recommended to government by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and endorsed by the NPHET, is that the remainder of the population after Group 9 will be completed on an age basis from those aged 64 years and younger, and that this decision will replace the previous groupings in the original plan.

The evidence is clear that hospitalisation and death risk increases with age, while a review

conducted by NIAC did not see any occupational group emerge as being at higher risk of morbidity or mortality. The risk of someone aged 55-64 with COVID-19 is 70 times higher in terms of death, over 20 times higher in terms of ICU admission and 5 times higher in terms of hospitalisation when compared to the risk facing someone aged 20-34 with COVID-19. I appreciate this change in schedule has been a cause of upset and disappointment for many in the education sector, and also in other sectors.

The move to an age-based model supports the vaccination programme objectives by protecting those at highest risk of serious illness, hospitalisation and death first regardless of occupation. The Department remains committed to regular engagement with the education partners and will continue to engage with unions and management bodies on all issues concerning Covid-19.

### **School Transport**

148. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education if she will resolve the issue of siblings (details supplied) that are unable to access the school transport scheme to a local school most suited to their educational needs; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32482/21]

**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 the Post Primary School Transport Scheme, children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 4.8kms from and are attending their nearest Post Primary School/Education Centre as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

Children who are eligible for school transport and who complete the application and payment process on time are accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation.

Children who are not eligible but who apply for school transport 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.

The National Council for Special Education acts in an advisory role to the Department of Education and Skills on the suitability of placements for children with special needs. Under the terms of the School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Educational Needs, the Department will consider the report of the Special Education Needs Organiser (SENO). School

transport is provided to children with special needs who are attending the nearest school to their place of residence that is or can be resourced to meet their educational needs, as identified by the SENO. Where a child has special educational needs, a parent/guardian should contact the school principal of the school that their child is attending who will assist in making an application for school transport to the SENO that is affiliated with their school.

### **Special Educational Needs**

149. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of implementing the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 in today's terms within a similar timeframe adjusting for inflation and accounting for the €397 million figure over five years outlined in the NCSE's 2006 implementation report on page 20. [32491/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I wish to advise the Deputy that a number of sections of the Education for Persons with Special Needs (EPSN) Act 2004 have been commenced. The commenced provisions include those establishing the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and those providing for an inclusive approach to the education of children with special educational needs.

The following sections of the EPSN Act were commenced in 2005.

Section 1 – Interpretation

Section 2 - providing for the inclusive education of children with Special Educational Needs

Section 14 – placing certain duties on schools

Sections 19 to 37 - placing the Council on a statutory footing.

Section 39 - placing certain duties on Health Boards

Sections 40 to 53 - amending the Education Act

Schedule 1 – providing for meetings and membership of the Council

Schedule 2 providing for the Chief Executive Officer of the Council.

The remaining sections of the Act have yet to be commenced. The Sections of the EPSN Act which have not been implemented are those which would have conferred a statutory entitlement to

- an educational assessment for all children with special educational needs.
- consequent development of a statutory individual educational plan (IEP).
- the delivery of detailed educational services on foot of this plan.
- an independent appeals process.

The NCSE estimated, in its Plan for the Implementation of the EPSN Act Report, which was published in 2006, that additional investment over a period of years of up to €235m per annum, across the education and health sectors, would be required to fully implement the EPSN Act.

The view of my Department, at the time, was that the level of investment required could be significantly greater than that envisaged in the NCSE report. Legal advice also indicated

that the EPSEN Act, as it is currently constituted, may not be implemented on a phased, or age cohort, basis.

Revised estimates of the amount of additional expenditure required to fully implement the remaining sections of the EPSEN Act have not recently been conducted. The estimated level of additional expenditure required, to implement the outstanding sections of the Act, would have to take into account annual demographic growth and service developments in the area of special educational needs, pricing adjustments and salary cost differentials on an ongoing basis. Estimates would also have to be made as to the number of pupils who may now currently qualify for the statutory service provisions envisaged by the EPSEN Act.

The Government is committed to helping every child, particularly those with special educational needs, to fulfil their potential.

In 2021 the Department of Education and Skills will invest approximately €2 Billion in the area of special educational needs support.

The Government has committed to consulting with stakeholders on how best to progress aspects of the EPSEN Act on a non-statutory basis.

A range of consultations with Education Partners and Stakeholders took place in relation to the development of a new model for allocating special education teachers over the course of 2017. The new model was introduced for all schools from September 2017.

Further consultations took place with education partners and stakeholders in the context of the undertaking of a comprehensive review of the SNA scheme and will continue in relation to the implementation of recommendations contained in this report.

Additional powers have also been provided to the National Council for Special Educational to designate a school place for a person with special educational needs, which is now provided for in the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018.

While awaiting the full implementation of the EPSEN Act, the NCSE has also published a number of policy advice papers which make recommendations aimed at developing a better or more effective alternative to the current resource allocation model, and which aims to move the system towards ultimate implementation of the EPSEN Act.

It should also be noted, however, that since EPSEN was enacted, the Department's policy on supporting children with special educational needs has changed and evolved on foot of evidence based policy advice from the NCSE which takes account of international perspectives.

Significantly, the focus of special needs education provision has changed from a model that is diagnosis led to one which is driven by the needs of the child. This is a substantially different view to the one underlying the EPSEN Act. The levels of investment by Government in special education has increased to facilitate the underlying reforms required to implement and embed the needs based approach.

This Government will continue to prioritise investment in the area of special education support. Ongoing investment and reform will continue to see improvements made in this area.

I have also indicated that one of my priorities as Minister for Special Education and Inclusion is:

Updating our Laws: Reviewing and updating the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act.

Any review of the Act will take into account the extent of additional investment which has been made in special educational services since 2004, with some €2 Billion per year now being spent of special educational supports.

It will also take into account the range of reforms which have taken place in recent years including the development of new allocation models which are not based primarily on a response to assessment as policy advice has indicated that requirement of diagnosis can create a risk of children being diagnosed as having a special educational need for resource allocation purposes, rather than for health reasons. Also, that as there is a spectrum of ability and disability within every special education disability category, account must be taken of need, as well as diagnosis.

### **Electric Vehicles**

150. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Education the number of electric or hybrid vehicles purchased by her Department in 2020 and to date in 2021, respectively in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32839/21]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm to the Deputy that my Department does not lease or own any vehicles including both electric or hybrid.

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

151. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of special enterprise support grants for self-employed persons issued to date; and the amount of funding provided by county and in tabular form. [32266/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Enterprise Support Grant (ESG) is available to eligible self-employed recipients who close their Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and re-start their business. A grant of up to €1,000 is available under this measure to assist with the costs associated with reopening a business.

I have recently extended the grant to make it available to those who claimed the grant in 2020 but who found themselves back on the PUP in 2021. The opportunity of a second grant, worth up to €1,000 applies to all eligible self-employed recipients who close their PUP on or after 1 June 2021.

Over 9,200 ESG applications have been approved since the introduction of this grant, with in excess of €8.5m paid to small businesses. This information is not maintained on a county basis.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Employment Support Services**

152. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the funding that will be provided to deliver the 10,000 places for the work placement experience programme outlined in the Economic Recovery Plan 2021. [32267/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The July Jobs Stimulus set out the Government investment plan of €200m investment towards training, education, skill

development, work placement schemes, recruitment subsidies and jobs search and assistance measures; these measures aim to help those who have lost their jobs find a new one, retrain or develop new skills, in particular for emerging growth sectors.

Included in this is provision for a funded work placement scheme to provide work experience for 10,000 jobseekers over two years, aged 18 - 65 years, where the job seeker has been unemployed for more than six months. Time spent on the pandemic unemployment payment (PUP) will be contribute towards eligibility. The programme will be open to all those who are job seeking with the particular aim of assisting those who have been disaffected by Covid-19 to pivot into new employment in new sectors through additional learning with new and relevant work experience. This work experience opportunity will provide important and valuable work and development opportunities to persons whose previous jobs are permanently lost due to COVID, as well as to those who were unemployed prior to COVID. The programme will support innovative learning and development opportunities for participants.

Under the July Jobs Stimulus, provision was made for €135m to fund the programme. These costs include an attractive weekly uplift to the usual welfare payments for participants.

This programme is included as one of the measures included under the Economic Recovery Plan, with some measures to be partially funded under an application to the Resilience and Recovery Facility to the EU. The funding application to the EU for this measure is €27m over the two years that the programme will run.

I will be bringing details of the programme and the associated funding provision to Government shortly for consideration and approval with a view to launching the programme shortly thereafter.

## **Employment Schemes**

153. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the funding that will be provided to deliver an additional 3,000 places on State employment schemes outlined in the Economic Recovery Plan 2021. [32269/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As outlined under the Government's Economic Recovery Plan, which was launched on June 1st 2021, a central focus of the recovery process will be on helping people get back to work, through the provision of employment support, additional training and work placement opportunities.

Central to achieving this objective will be the Government's forthcoming national employment services strategy, 'Pathways to Work 2021-2025', which is currently being finalised by my Department. By increasing labour market supports, and through the provision of employment support, activation and skills opportunities, the Pathways to Work strategy will act as a key delivery mechanism of the Economic Recovery Plan's second pillar 'Helping People Back into Work'.

My Department provides a range of social employment and training programmes that are targeted at long-term unemployed jobseekers. These supports include Community Employment and Tús. The aim of both schemes is to enhance the employability of disadvantaged and unemployed people, by providing work experience opportunities for participants. CE also provides valuable training opportunities for participants.

As part of the recovery efforts, my Department has committed to providing an additional 3,000 places on these State Employment Schemes. The additional places will be distributed

between CE and Tús and will provide additional valuable opportunities for long-term unemployed persons. They will also support CE and Tús schemes in providing further services to local communities. The estimated cost of an additional 3,000 CE and Tús participants for a full year is €50.4 million, based on the current payment rate which includes participant payroll, supervisory costs, training and associated administration costs.

I will continue to support and improve these programmes for the benefit of the long-term unemployed including those who have been adversely affected by the pandemic.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

## **Youth Services**

154. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the funding that will be provided to deliver the new youth employment charter and the new EU reinforced youth guarantee process outlined in the Economic Recovery Plan 2021. [32270/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As outlined under the Government's Economic Recovery Plan, which was launched on June 1st 2021, a central focus of the recovery process will be on helping people get back to work, through the provision of employment support, additional training and work placement opportunities.

Central to achieving this objective will be the Government's forthcoming national employment services strategy, 'Pathways to Work 2021-2025', which is currently being finalised by my Department. By increasing labour market supports, and through the provision of employment support, activation and skills opportunities, the Pathways to Work strategy will act as a key delivery mechanism of the Economic Recovery Plan's second pillar 'Helping People Back into Work'.

In supporting people back into employment, the Pathways to Work 2021–2025 strategy will seek to minimise any long-term scarring effects of the pandemic on the labour force for those whose jobs are permanently lost while providing support to those unemployed pre-pandemic. The Strategy will also set out how an expanded Public Employment Service will utilise its existing and expanded capacity to deliver effective services in a post-COVID labour market with an overall target of increasing the caseload capacity by 100,000 per annum.

As part of this, my Department's forthcoming Pathways to strategy will have a particular focus on young people, given the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on this group. This will include the development of a new Government Youth Charter and the implementation of the EU's new Reinforced Youth Guarantee.

The Council of the European Union believed it was important to reinforce the existing Youth Guarantee to aid in alleviating the labour market impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on young people. This aim is complementary to our objectives in Government. As Minister for Social Protection, I welcome the Council recommendation on a reinforced Youth Guarantee and am committing to implement it under the forthcoming Pathways to Work strategy.

Central to the Reinforced Youth Guarantee is the widening of the youth age bracket to include young people aged 25-29. As part of activation services provided by my Department via Intreo, young people under 25 receive the most intensive engagement. My Department intend to extend this up to age 29, as per the new reinforced Youth Guarantee, and are currently exploring the necessary system changes to allow for this to be put in place.



The implementation and delivery of a new Government Youth Charter and the Reinforced Youth Guarantee will be in addition to wider employment support and activation services open to, but not targeted solely at young jobseekers. It is not anticipated that any additional funding will be ring-fenced for the two aforementioned new measures.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

### **Employment Schemes**

155. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the funding that will be provided to deliver the 8,000 JobsPlus scheme places outlined in the Economic Recovery Plan 2021. [32273/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** JobsPlus is a subsidy that is paid to employers who recruit long-term unemployed people for new positions in their workplace. Employers can avail of JobsPlus when filling new positions or positions that arise as a consequence of natural turnover. The employer can receive a subsidy of €7,500 or €10,000 per eligible employee.

The July Jobs Stimulus provided for changes to the support which included providing access to the support by Pandemic Unemployment Payment recipients and amendment to the qualifying criteria for those under 30 years to 4 months on the Live Register in the previous 6 months. The scheme has an overall budget allocation of €28.3m for 2021 to provide for these measures and up to 8,000 places.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Employment Support Services**

156. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the funding that will be provided to deliver the 150 employment case officer job coaches during 2021 to conduct 1,600,000 one-to-one case worker and jobseeker meetings over a rolling 12-month period as outlined in the Economic Recovery Plan 2021. [32274/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As outlined under the Government's Economic Recovery Plan, which was launched on June 1st 2021, a central focus of the recovery process will be on helping people get back to work, through the provision of employment support, additional training and work placement opportunities.

Central to achieving this objective will be the Government's forthcoming national employment services strategy, 'Pathways to Work 2021-2025', which is currently being finalised by my Department. By increasing labour market supports, and through the provision of employment support, activation and skills opportunities, the Pathways to Work strategy will act as a key delivery mechanism of the Economic Recovery Plan's second pillar 'Helping People Back into Work'.

In supporting people back into employment, the Pathways to Work 2021–2025 strategy will seek to minimise any long-term scarring effects of the pandemic on the labour force for those whose jobs are permanently lost while providing support to those unemployed pre-pandemic. The Strategy will also set out how an expanded Public Employment Service will utilise its existing and expanded capacity to deliver effective services in a post-COVID labour market with an overall target of increasing the caseload capacity by 100,000 per annum.

In expanding the capacity of the Public Employment Service and Intreo Centres, my Department committed, under the July Jobs Stimulus last year, to the assignment of 100 Job Coaches to provide enhanced employment services and supports. As part of the forthcoming Pathways to Work strategy, this has been increased to 150 Job Coaches, to further build on this capacity and what will be a crucial resource in assisting our recovery efforts. At present, 84 of these Job Coaches are currently in place.

The annual cost of the assignment of 150 Job Coaches is estimated at €7.1 million, based on relevant annual average salary.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment**

157. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will increase expenditure on the pandemic unemployment payment in the event that further restrictions are required. [32502/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) has proven to be a vital support to people who lost their jobs due to the pandemic. To date, Government has spent some €8 billion on the scheme, demonstrating its commitment to workers impacted by the pandemic.

On 1st June Government announced its National Economic Recovery Plan to support the reopening of the country as it recovers from Covid-19. As the vaccine program is continuing at pace and restrictions are lifted and the economy reopens it is timely to set out the approach to regularising payments in the months ahead to reflect the facts that more jobs are becoming available and the requirement for exceptional measures is diminishing. To allow as much time as possible for employment to recover, a transitional approach will be taken with payments reduced on a tapered basis over 6 months from September.

This position would be reviewed in the event that further restrictions were required and considered in the context of the circumstances presented at that time.

I trust that this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Departmental Schemes**

158. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons with disabilities that are currently availing of the training support grants. [32505/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Training Support Grant, available through my Department, is designed to support quick access to short-term training where the training is not delivered by a State provider.

As part of the July Stimulus the funding available through this grant was doubled from €500 to €1,000. There is a provision of €11.3m for this support in 2021 to assist with the training needs of up to 12,000 individuals.

The grant assisted approximately 3,000 jobseekers with short-term training needs in 2020. Statistics are not maintained on the number of individuals with disabilities assisted under this grant.

Also announced in Budget 2020 was the extension of the facility of the Training Support Grant through Employability Service contractors. The administrative measures to support this extension are being put in place and it is expected to be operational shortly.

### Departmental Schemes

159. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Social Protection the breakdown of the groups of disabled persons that are applying for the training support grants. [32506/21]

160. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Social Protection the amount of funds within her Department allocated for the training support grant. [32507/21]

161. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Social Protection the courses or training opportunities for which the training support grant has been used. [32512/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 159, 160 and 161 together.

The Training Support Grant, available through my Department, is designed to support quick access to short-term training where the training is not delivered by a State provider. Supports are tailored to the individual and there are no restrictions on the industry or sector where training may be supported. The grant can be used for courses up to level 6 on the QQI or training such as safe pass, driving licences, HACCP or security industry permits as appropriate.

As part of the July Stimulus the funding available through this grant was doubled from €500 to €1,000. There is a provision of €11.3m for this support in 2021 to assist with the training needs of up to 12,000 individuals.

The grant assisted approximately 3,000 jobseekers with short-term training needs in 2020. Statistics are not maintained on the number of individuals with disabilities assisted under this grant.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

*Question No. 160 answered with Question No. 159.*

*Question No. 161 answered with Question No. 159.*

### Social Welfare Schemes

162. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a person (details supplied) is entitled to the dependent adult allowance based on their contributory pension and the split of savings. [32167/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Increase for qualified adult (IQA) is a means-tested payment, payable to State pension (contributory) claimants whose spouse, civil partner or cohabitant is being wholly or mainly maintained by them, and where that qualified adult's personal means from any source does not exceed a means test income limit. 50% of jointly-held means or assets is assessable.

Where a qualified adult has weekly means of less than €100, the maximum rate of IQA is payable. Where their weekly means are between €100 and €310, a tapering reduced rate of IQA is payable. If the qualified adult has means of more than €310 per week, this exceeds the means

limit and there is no entitlement to an IQA payment.

An IQA review commenced on 12 May 2021 whereby a means questionnaire and explanatory letter was issued to the spouse of the person concerned, being the State pension (contributory) customer. As qualified adult on their spouse's pension, the person concerned was assessed with weekly means from capital in excess of €310.00. As this exceeds the current statutory limit for the IQA payment, the IQA has ceased with effect from 10 June 2021, and the customer has been notified accordingly.

The person's entitlement to a State pension (contributory) in their own right can be determined on receipt of a completed application form. An application form has been issued and I have also arranged for a copy of their social insurance record to issue to them.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Schemes**

163. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on an application for disability allowance by a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32201/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person concerned submitted an application for disability allowance (DA) on 5 May 2021. Their application, based upon all the evidence submitted, was refused on medical grounds as it was not found that the person concerned was substantially restricted in taking up employment.

The person concerned was notified in writing of this decision on 14 June 2021 and was also notified of their right to request a review of this decision or to appeal it to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO).

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Schemes**

164. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the supports in place for persons in receipt of the carer's allowance and who have been in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment; if there has been consideration for those carers who cannot return to work as yet and who also cannot sign up to jobseeker's allowance as a result of their part-time employment and means-testing requirement of the carer's allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32210/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Government acknowledges the crucial role that family carers play and is fully committed to supporting carers in that role. This commitment is recognised in both the Programme for Government and the National Carers' Strategy.

The main income supports to carers provided by this Department are Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit, Domiciliary Care Allowance and the Carer's Support Grant. The projected expenditure on Carer's Allowance in 2021 is €953 million. Combined spending on all these payments to carers in 2021 is expected to be approximately €1.5 billion.

Carer's Allowance is a social welfare assistance scheme which is means-tested and provides

a payment for carers who, on a full-time basis, look after certain people in need of full-time care and attention and where the carer's income falls below certain limits. The two principal conditions for receipt of Carer's Allowance are that full-time care and attention is required and being provided, and that the means test which applies is satisfied.

The primary objective of Carer's Allowance is to provide an income support to carers whose earning capacity is significantly constrained as a consequence of their caring responsibilities and, in doing so, to protect the interests of the person in respect of whom care is being provided by ensuring that payment of the allowance is contingent on the provision of the necessary hours of care. However, in order to support a carer's continued attachment to the workforce and broader social inclusion, carers may engage in some limited employment, education or training, while still being regarded as being in a position to provide full-time care. The maximum period in which a person may engage in in employment, education and training is 18.5 hours per week and during this time, adequate provision must be made for the care of the relevant person.

In responding to COVID-19, my Department made special provisions for those who may be most vulnerable and negatively affected at this time and have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic. As the Deputy is aware, the Department introduced the following short-term emergency payment- the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP). A carer whose work ceases as a result of COVID-19 and whose situation qualifies them for the PUP will get the payment along with their current carer income support, whether Carer's Allowance or Carer's Benefit.

.Jobseeker's Allowance is not payable with Carer's Allowance as in order to qualify for Jobseeker's Allowance a person must be unemployed and looking for work. The conditions attached to the Jobseeker's Allowance payment are fundamentally incongruent with the nature of the Carer's Allowance payment.

With regard to other supports available for carers it should be noted that the annual Carer's Support Grant is available to all family carers providing full-time care and assistance, regardless of means. This is not available for any other group nor is there an equivalent payment for carers in any other country in Europe. The Grant is paid automatically to people in receipt of Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit or Domiciliary Care Allowance. Other people who are not in receipt of a social welfare payment but who are providing full time care and attention are also eligible and can apply for a 'standalone' grant. As part of Budget 2021, I increased the Grant from its previous rate of €1,700 to €1,850 – the highest ever rate at which it has been paid since it was first introduced. At the start of June the Grant was paid to some 117,000 carers. The estimated expenditure on the Carer's Support Grant this year is over €265 million.

I will continue to keep the range of income supports provided to family carers by this Department under review and will ensure that consultations with carer's representative groups continue so that the overall objectives of the carer income support schemes provided are met. However, any changes to the current supports provided by this Department would have implications for overall spending and could only be addressed in an overall budgetary context.

## **Pension Provisions**

165. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection if representatives of retired staff can be excluded from discussions around the resolution of actuarial deficits and the governance structure of their schemes in relation to the operation of minimum funding standards in occupational pensions schemes and the functioning of the Pension Authority; if retired staff associations can make submissions to her or the Pensions Authority in relation to mini-

mum funding standards; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32216/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** All dealings and decisions made by corporate or individual trustees of an occupational pension scheme are governed by legislation and enforced through the supervision of the Pensions Authority, including matters in relation to representation and arbitration for pensioner members of schemes.

The duties of a pension scheme trustee include administering a scheme in trust in accordance with the law and the terms of the trust deed and rules of the scheme. Consequently, any decision made by corporate or individual trustees of an occupational pension scheme are governed by the relevant legislation and rules set out in the trust deed and the rules of the particular scheme. Trustees of pension schemes must act in the best financial interests of the scheme members, whether active, deferred or retired, and must serve all beneficiaries of the scheme impartially. If there is a conflict of interest then a person's duty as a trustee must take precedence over other interests.

Measures were introduced in 2015 to facilitate engagement between the trustees of a pension scheme and groups representing the interests of pensioner and deferred scheme members. Changes to guidance issued by the Pensions Authority require the trustees of a pension scheme to notify groups representing the interest of scheme members of proposals to issue a direction under section 50 of the Pensions Act to restructure scheme benefits. This affords the representative group an opportunity to make a submission to the trustees of a pension scheme in relation to proposals to restructure scheme benefits in advance of any proposed change taking effect.

These changes facilitate engagement between groups representing the interests of pensioner and deferred scheme members, the Pensions Authority and the trustees of a pension scheme. Groups representing the interests of pensioners and deferred scheme members have a right to appeal a section 50 direction by the Pensions Authority to the High Court on a point of law.

More generally, there is no impediment to scheme members, or a representative group for such scheme members, from communicating to the trustees of a scheme in respect of matters pertaining to that scheme. In addition, any scheme members, or their representative groups, can make submissions to my Department in respect of the funding standard. Any such persons wishing to engage with, or make a submission to, the Pensions Authority should contact that office directly.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

### **Pension Provisions**

166. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to changes made to the selection process for members of the ESB pension scheme board of trustees and specifically that this new process now acts to exclude retired staff members who are active members of their own representative associations; if such an attempt to exclude potential trustees is in line with current legislation; if she will request the Pensions Authority to investigate this process; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32217/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Deputy will appreciate that I am unable to comment or intervene on issues relating to a particular pension scheme. Issues in relation to the ESB pension scheme are primarily a matter for the trustees of the scheme and the ESB Group. Matters directly related to the ESB Group come under the remit of the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications.

The Pensions Authority is the regulatory body charged with the supervision of pension schemes in Ireland and has the necessary powers under statute to investigate the conduct of a pension scheme should it become aware that a scheme is not in compliance with the provisions of the Pensions Act.

Where a pension scheme member is of the view that scheme is not in compliance with legislative requirements it is open to that member to make a formal complaint to the Pensions Authority.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

### Social Welfare Rates

167. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated cost of indexing core social welfare rates to 27.5% of average weekly earnings; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32265/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Central Statistics Office (CSO) produce various estimates of earnings, covering different time periods and income bases. The range of estimates cater for, for example, annual and quarterly figures, average earnings for regular earnings, and average earnings which include irregular earnings.

In addition, the CSO has advised caution when looking at earnings data since the onset of the pandemic crisis due to the impact of Covid supports and reduced response rates for the Earnings, Hours and Employment Costs Survey (EHECS). In light of the caution expressed by the CSO, I set out below a cost for increasing the main weekly social welfare rates by €1 per scheme.

Payment	Personal €m	Qualified Adult €m	Total €m
Social Insurance Schemes			
State Pension (Contributory)	€ 22.0	€ 3.0	€ 25.0
Widow/er's or Surviving Civil Partner's (Con) Pension	€ 6.2		€ 6.2
Deserted Wife's Benefit	€ 0.3		€ 0.3
Invalidity Pension	€ 3.1	€ 0.2	€ 3.3
Partial Capacity Benefit	€ 0.1	€ 0.0	€ 0.1
Guardian's Payment (Contributory)	€ 0.1		€ 0.1
Disablement Pension	€ 0.2		€ 0.2
Illness Benefit	€ 2.5	€ 0.1	€ 2.6
Jobseeker's Benefit	€ 6.6	€ 0.4	€ 7.0
Jobseeker's Benefit (Self Employed)	€ 0.2	€ 0.0	€ 0.2
Carer's Benefit	€ 0.2		€ 0.2
Maternity & Adoptive Benefit	€ 1.0		€ 1.0
Paternity & Parent's Benefit	€ 0.1		€ 0.1
Social Assistance Schemes			
State Pension (Non Con)	€ 5.0	€ 0.1	€ 5.1
Blind Person's Pension	€ 0.1	€ 0.0	€ 0.1
Widow/ers or Surviving Civil Partner's (Non-Con) Pension	€ 0.1		€ 0.1
One-Parent Family Payment	€ 2.1		€ 2.1

Payment	Personal €m	Qualified Adult €m	Total €m
Carer's Allowance	€ 2.6		€ 2.6
Half Rate Carer's Allowance	€ 1.1		€ 1.1
Jobseeker's Allowance Max Rate	€ 6.4	€ 1.1	€ 7.5
JA age 18 to 24	€ 0.7	€ 0.0	€ 0.7
Disability Allowance	€ 8.0	€ 0.6	€ 8.6
Farm Assist	€ 0.3	€ 0.1	€ 0.4
Employment Support Schemes (BTWA & BTEA)	€ 0.7	€ 0.1	€ 0.8
Employment/Internship Schemes (CE, Tús, RSS etc.)	€ 1.7	€ 0.3	€ 2.0
Supplementary Welfare Allowance	€ 0.7	€ 0.1	€ 0.8
TOTAL*	€ 72.1	€ 6.1	€ 78.2

\*Rounding may affect totals.

The costs shown above are based on the estimated number of recipients in 2021. This costing is subject to change in the context of emerging trends and associated revision of the estimated numbers of recipients.

### Departmental Schemes

168. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason a person in ownership of a property worth €120,000 other than their home has no means to appeal a decision in relation to the fuel allowance; if she plans to introduce amendments to the relevant legislation and guidelines in order to avoid unfair situations like this arising (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32286/21]

169. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a person (details supplied) has means to appeal a decision in relation to the fuel allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32287/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 168 and 169 together.

The Fuel Allowance is a payment of €28.00 per week for 28 weeks (a total of €784 each year) from October to April, to over 370,000 low income households, at an estimated cost of €300 million in 2021. The purpose of this payment is to assist these households with their energy costs. The allowance represents a contribution towards the energy costs of a household. It is not intended to meet those costs in full. Only one allowance is paid per household.

The criteria for fuel allowance are framed in order to direct the limited resources available to my Department in as targeted a manner as possible. All recipients of non-contributory payments are accepted as satisfying the means-test for fuel. People who are in receipt of a qualifying contributory payment must also satisfy a means test.

The standard capital means assessment rules for State Pension (Contributory) purposes apply to Fuel Allowance applicants who have capital. An applicant may have capital/savings of up to €57,999 (i.e., equivalent to €100.00 a week under capital means assessment rules) in addition to income of up to the maximum State Pension rate, and still be eligible to receive a Fuel Allowance. If an applicant has a second property (property other than their own home), then rental income from that property is assessed. However, the capital value (less any mortgage outstanding on the property) will be assessed if the property is not rented.



There are no plans at this time to change the fuel allowance means test criteria so that the value of a second property owned by an applicant is disregarded.

With regards to the right of appeal, the fuel allowance scheme is administrative (non-statutory) and therefore decisions on claims cannot be appealed to the Social Welfare Appeals Office. However, if a customer is dissatisfied with a decision not to grant an allowance, s/he may request a review of his/her claim by a different Deciding Officer. It is open to applicants to supply any additional facts of information in support of his/her application. However, if it is the case that they are simply not qualified for payment, a review will not overturn the previous decision. If following this review, the applicant still does not qualify for the allowance it is still open to them to contact the Office of the Ombudsman.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

*Question No. 169 answered with Question No. 168.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment**

170. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Social Protection the current status in relation to the outstanding arrears of the pandemic unemployment payment for a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32318/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** When a customer makes a claim for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, and is deemed eligible for payment, the claim is put into payment on a week 1 basis and any arrears that may be due are issued at a later stage. The first arrears payment issued to customers on the December 1st, 2020 and included any arrears due to customers for the period 13th March to 26th November, 2020. My Department's records indicate that the customer in question received a payment of €903 on 1st December for the period 13th March to 2nd April, 2020 and was paid to her nominated bank account. There are no further arrears due.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Community Employment Schemes**

171. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Social Protection her views on extending the employment of all persons in the community employment programme until at least 31 December 2021 given the difficulty in replacing persons during the Covid-19 pandemic; if she will address the concerns raised by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32439/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** 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.

At the onset of the Covid-19 emergency last year my Department introduced a number of contingency measures to support CE schemes including the extension of participant contracts. These measures have continued and, in particular, during the Level 5 periods of restriction in place over the course of the last fifteen months.

Accordingly, CE participants due to finish on schemes since October 2020, have had their

contracts extended on a number of occasions.

On the 11th of June Minister of State, Joe O'Brien and myself announced further measures to support participants of both Community Employment (CE) and Tús schemes. Under these measures, CE and Tús participants' contracts will be further extended until the end of October 2021. This will benefit 7,000 participants who have been granted contract extensions since last October and whose contracts were due to end next month. These measures will also benefit over 4,000 additional existing CE and Tús participants whose contracts would ordinarily come to an end between July and October.

These measures will ensure that schemes can fully re-commence service delivery in local communities, while also supporting participants who have been long-term unemployed. This latest extension will also allow participants further opportunities to complete their training and work placement experience.

Importantly, this final extension will also allow CE and Tús schemes to conclude participants' placements on a co-ordinated and phased basis. This will also facilitate the planned increase in the rate of referrals to fill existing and new vacancies to ensure that opportunities to participate on the schemes continue to be available to those who are long term unemployed and furthest removed from the labour market.

From the end of October there will be a phased exit of those CE and Tús participants who have benefitted from this latest extension over a number of months up until February 2022.

To assist with this transitional arrangement, there will also be a short contract extension for those CE and Tús participants whose contracts would be normally due to end between November 2021 and February 2022.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy at this time.

### **Social Welfare Schemes**

172. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated cost of increasing the domiciliary care allowance from €309.50 to €330 per week; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32485/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The estimated full year cost of increasing the Domiciliary Care Allowance to €330 per month is €11.4 million.

The cost shown above is based on the estimated number of recipients in 2021. This costing is subject to change in the context of emerging trends and associated revision of the estimated numbers of recipients.

### **Social Welfare Schemes**

173. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated cost of expanding the free travel scheme to include persons in receipt of the domiciliary care allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32486/21]

**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 999,000 customers with direct eligibility. The 2021 funding allocation for the free travel scheme is €95 million.

Providing an accurate projection of the cost of extending the free travel scheme to all children in respect of whom a domiciliary care allowance is being paid is very difficult as the cost is determined by the usage of the extra passes provided and not by the number of newly qualified people. The fact that many operators have reduced fares for children and that in some cases children under five years of age can travel for free would also have to be taken into account. Taking all of this into consideration, I am advised that the yearly cost of the measure suggested by the Deputy could be as high as an estimated €6.1 million.

Any decision to extend the free travel scheme to all children in respect of whom a domiciliary care allowance is being paid would require additional funding for the free travel scheme and would have to be considered in the context of overall budgetary negotiations.

Domiciliary care allowance is a monthly payment of €309.50 to the carer of a child with a disability. The allowance may be used for the additional costs involved in caring for the child and this may include additional transport costs.

Under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme (SWA) the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection may award a travel supplement in any case where the circumstances of the case so warrant. The supplement is intended to assist with ongoing or recurring travel costs that cannot be met from the person's own resources and are deemed to be necessary. Every decision is based on consideration of the circumstances of the 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.

### **Social Welfare Schemes**

174. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated cost of increasing the annual carer's support grant from €1,850 to €2,000; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32487/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The estimated full year cost of increasing the Carer's Support Grant by €150 is €21.5m.

This cost is based on the estimated number of recipients in 2021 and is subject to change in light of emerging trends and subsequent revision of the estimated number of recipients.

### **Social Welfare Schemes**

175. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated cost of making the carer's allowance a qualifying payment for the fuel allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32488/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Fuel Allowance is a household based payment of €28.00 per week for 28 weeks (a total of €784 each year), paid from October to April, to 370,000 low income households, at an estimated cost of €300 million in 2021. The purpose of this payment is to assist these households with their energy costs. The allowance represents a contribution towards the energy costs of a household. It is not intended

to meet those costs in full. Only one allowance is paid per household.

My Department also pays an electricity or gas allowance under the Household Benefits scheme at an estimated cost of €195 million in 2021. This is paid at a rate of €35 per month, 12 months of the year.

Taking account the fact that the fuel allowance is a household based payment and that qualification is not just based on receipt of a qualifying payment but on a number of other complex qualifying criteria such as household composition, providing an accurate projection of the cost by my Department is not possible.

The Government values the role of carers very much and it is for this reason that they receive significant income supports from the Department. In addition to the Carer's Benefit and Carer's Allowance schemes, carers receive further support in the form of free travel and household benefits (for those who live with the person for whom they care) and the annual Carer's Support Grant in respect of each person for whom they care. In Budget 2021 I was delighted to announce an increase to the Carer's Support Grant by €150 to €1,850. This will benefit over 130,000 carers. Carers in receipt of an increase for a qualified child on their claim also benefit from the Budget 2021 increase to the qualified child rate, by €5 in the case of a child aged 12 or over and by €2 for a child aged up to 12.

Fuel Allowance is a household-based payment, and a Carer will very often live with and be caring for a person in receipt of a qualifying payment for Fuel Allowance. Income from full rate Carer's Allowance is disregarded from the fuel means test if the carer is providing full time care and attention to the Fuel Allowance applicant, his/her qualified spouse / civil partner or cohabitant or qualified child(ren).

If a person is getting certain qualifying social welfare payments and also providing full time care and attention to another person, s/he can keep his/her main social protection payment in addition to receiving the half-rate Carer's Allowance. S/he can also receive an extra half-rate Carer's Allowance if s/he cares for more than one person. It should also be noted that the payment of half-rate Carer's Allowance does not preclude a person from qualifying for Fuel Allowance. If a person is in receipt of a non-contributory social welfare payment and a half-rate Carer's Allowance, then s/he is deemed to have satisfied the means test and Fuel Allowance is payable, subject to all remaining criteria being satisfied. If a person is in receipt of a contributory social welfare payment and a half-rate Carer's Allowance then s/he will have to satisfy a means test in order to qualify for Fuel Allowance.

The maximum rates of Carer's Allowance for those aged under 66, at €219 (€257 for carers aged 66 or over) where one person is being cared for, and €328.50 (€385.50 for carers aged 66 or over) where there are two or more carees, is significantly higher than that for most schemes administered by my Department.

The means test for Carer's allowance has been significantly eased over the years and is now one of the most generous means tests in the social welfare system, most notably with regard to spouse's earnings. At present the means test for Carer's Allowance allows for an income disregard of €332.50 per week for a single person and €665 for a couple. In the case of a single carer, that person may retain a full-rate payment of €219.00 while having an annual income of just under €19,000, or retain a payment of €109.00 per week (just under half rate) while having an annual income of €25,400, or retain the minimum payment of €4 per week while having an annual income of €31,100.

Carers can also engage in employment, self-employment, training or education courses outside the home for not more than 18.5 hours a week.

Any decision to amend the criteria for receiving Fuel Allowance, to include Carer's Allowance as a qualifying payment, would have to be considered in the overall policy and budgetary context.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Schemes**

176. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated cost of increasing the income disregard for carer's allowance from €332.50 to €350 per week for a single person and to €700 for a couple; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32489/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Government acknowledges the important role that family carers play and is fully committed to supporting carers in that role. This commitment is recognised in both the Programme for Government and the National Carers' Strategy.

The main income supports to carers provided by my Department are Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit, Domiciliary Care Allowance and the Carer's Support Grant. Combined spending on these payments to carers in 2021 is expected to exceed €1.4 billion.

As of May, there were 89,523 recipients of Carer's Allowance. The estimated expenditure for the payment in 2021 is in the region of €953 million.

The means test for Carer's Allowance is one of the most generous in the social protection system. Currently, €332.50 of gross weekly income is disregarded in the calculation of means for a single person; the equivalent for someone who is married, in a civil partnership or cohabiting is €665 of combined gross weekly income.

By comparison, the income disregard applied to Disability Allowance is €140 per week. For Jobseeker's Allowance, it is €20 per day up to a maximum of €60, and the balance is assessed at 60%. For Jobseeker's Transitional Payment, the weekly income disregard is €165 with 50% of the balance assessed as means.

The ESRI SWITCH microsimulation model is used for the purposes of estimates such as the one requested. The estimated gross expenditure is an additional €1.16m annually. However, it should be noted that it is not possible to estimate the increase in the number of persons entitled to the Carer's Allowance if the means test thresholds were increased. This is primarily because it is not known how many people there are caring and working that are currently over the income limit but who could apply for/become eligible for Carer's Allowance if the income limits were higher. SWITCH cannot model behavioural responses in such cases.

SWITCH showed no distribution/poverty affects arising from the increase suggested by the Deputy. It is important to note that based on the Department's own analysis of the Carer's Allowance, some 92% of the current recipients of Carer's Allowance have no means or means of less than €7.60 per week and would not benefit by an increase in the disregard. Carers who would benefit from an increased disregard would be in higher income households.

Any changes to the means test must be considered in an overall budgetary context.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Electric Vehicles**

177. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of electric or hybrid vehicles purchased by her Department in 2020 and to date in 2021, respectively in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32859/21]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department did not purchase any vehicles in 2020 or to date in 2021.

By way of context, my Department and its agencies currently have three motor vehicles. The cost of replacing these vehicles with an electrical equivalent is estimated to be in the region of €85,000 (excluding VAT and VRT).

As the energy usage on these vehicles is relatively low, the Department does not consider that there is an economic or major environmental benefit in changing these vehicles at this time.

At the end of their life cycle, consideration will be given to the need to replace them and to the best environmental option at that stage.

### **Domestic Violence**

178. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the services that are available for survivors of domestic abuse in County Clare by location. [32373/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, has statutory responsibility for the care and protection of victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV). The response to DSGBV is a cross Departmental and multi-agency issue with policy coordinated by the Department of Justice. Tusla supports some 60 front line DSGBV services around the country, and the Department has increased its funding to Tusla for this sector by some €4.7 million this year. Overall funding now stands at a total of €30 million for 2021.

Clare Haven Services is based in Ennis, and provides emergency refuge accommodation and support to women and children experiencing domestic violence. The service also provides a 24-hour confidential domestic violence help line, court accompaniment services, and outreach supports in several towns throughout County Clare. Depending on the convenience or geographical location of service users, or the availability of refuge spaces, individuals in County Clare may choose to use services in Counties Limerick, Tipperary, Kerry, or elsewhere.

Rape Crisis Midwest is based in Limerick City, and provides an outreach service in the Ennis area for adult survivors of sexual violence and childhood sexual abuse. The organisation also provides telephone support and one-to-one counselling. Individuals may engage with the service via its Limerick base, or the outreach service in Clare. Other supports for survivors of sexual violence are also available in neighbouring counties, if convenient.

In addition to services located in County Clare, Tusla supports national services that assist survivors of DSGBV throughout the country. Women’s Aid and Dublin Rape Crisis Centre provide two 24-hour national helplines for victims of domestic and sexual violence. Funding for the two national helplines has increased in the context of increased reports of DSGBV during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tusla also provides funding to the Men’s Development Network and Men’s Aid to operate two helplines for male victims of abuse. All of these services are available and open to survivors of DSGBV in County Clare.

With regard to emergency accommodation for victims of DSGBV in Clare, Tusla is under-

taking a review of these services nationwide. This will assess the current and requisite distribution of safe emergency accommodation. The review's findings and the recommendations of the Monitoring Committee of the Second National Strategy on DSGBV will inform Tusla's future decisions on priority areas for investment and development of services. Tusla has advised me that this report will be finalised in the coming weeks.

It is of the utmost importance that the needs of those who experience domestic violence in County Clare, and across Ireland, are met in the most appropriate way possible. I strongly support the work of Tusla and its funded service providers and I am committed to supporting the Agency in meeting the needs of individuals who experience domestic violence.

### **Unaccompanied Minors and Separated Children**

179. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will cease the practice of relocating unaccompanied minors whose application for international protection is still being processed when they turn 18 to adult reception centres via direct provision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32500/21]

189. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his views on the practice of where unaccompanied children who come to Ireland to seek asylum are being removed from their foster families and placed in direct provision when they turn eighteen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32480/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 179 and 189 together.

Thank you Deputy for highlighting this issue.

All children in care are involved in developing their aftercare plan in the years and months coming up to their 18th birthday when, as legal adults, they are no longer in the statutory care of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. The specialist team working with these children and young adults, the Separated Children's Team, is fully aware of and attentive to their aspirations and needs, especially for those whom their application for international protection has not yet been decided.

As you will know, applications for international protection are processed through the Department of Justice. The Separated Children Team helps the children in their care to apply for international protection, they also provide assistance in completing applications for family reunification. Having decisions relating to their status made as early as possible is crucially important, however, some children arrive in their 17th year and their application may not be processed before they reach their majority.

The vast majority of children in receipt of a service from Tusla's Separated Children team receive some form of residency permission before they are 18, and as such, will not avail of direct provision. If a care leaver is waiting for a final decision on their international protection application, and they turn 18 years of age, they may be referred to the IPAS for accommodation.

Tusla's current practice; where a young person is deemed to be exceptionally vulnerable, they may continue to be accommodated in a Tusla residential centre or in their foster placement.

In Budget 2021, I secured an additional €5m for Tusla to provide dedicated services to accelerate the intake of children from Greek refugee camps. Tusla officials have developed a suite of care options to include expansion of residential care placements and development of

specialist foster care placements. The suite of additional services included additional aftercare supports for separated young people in aftercare.

At the end of 2020 there were 64 children under 18 in the care of the Separated Children Seeking International Protection Team in Tusla and a further 93 young adults between the ages of 18 and 22 were in receipt of an aftercare service.

The impact of the cyber-attack on Tusla systems continues to be felt. Tusla continues to provide a vital service and is working hard to restore their IT systems and access to information. When proper access is restored I will ensure that you are provided with more detail on this matter.

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

180. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if there are plans to revisit the ECCE capitation and the shortfall in funding faced by childcare facilities that run a seasonal service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32170/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** My Department is not planning to reviewing the capitation levels paid to the providers of ECCE services for the forthcoming 2021/22 ECCE programme year.

The capitation levels for the 2021-22 ECCE programme year were published by Pobal on 27 May 2021, and are set at €69 per child per 15 hours of ECCE per week, with a higher capitation rate of €80.25 per child per week where the ECCE programme is provided by a childcare practitioner with a relevant qualification of level 7 or above.

ECCE service providers are currently eligible for additional supports from the State due to the Covid pandemic. These supports include an enhanced rate of Employee Wage Support Payment, which covers, on average, 80% of a providers wage bill. In addition, providers who are facing financial difficulties can apply for support from my Department’s Sustainability Fund.

As the Deputy is aware, my Department is currently carrying out a review of the Funding Model for the early learning and childcare sector, which includes consideration of the interaction between the existing streams of current funding, including ECCE, and any new Funding Model. The new Funding Model will build on other schemes to leverage improvements in quality, affordability, accessibility and social inclusion.

Any proposals to increase the current ECCE capitation will be considered following the completion of the review of the Funding Model.

### **Childcare Services**

181. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his attention has been drawn to the spiralling costs of childcare in particular in the Dublin 8 area in which parents are being faced by a €200 or 20% increase by some service providers without explanation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32194/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I am very concerned to hear of any individual provider proposing to increase charges to parents at a time when the Government continues to support early learning and



childcare providers very significantly. In view of the extent of State support, increases are not justified at this time.

One of my key priorities in Government is to achieve affordability of early learning and care and school age childcare. The Programme for Government commits to substantially reducing fees to parents while supporting quality service provision. The Government has been strongly supportive of the sector, particularly since the onset of Covid-19. We have provided substantial additional supports to allow services to operate sustainably throughout the pandemic, acknowledging that there are higher delivery costs and many extra practical and financial challenges to be met. One of the objectives of these supports was to ensure that the higher delivery costs due to public health requirements and lower occupancy were not passed on to parents.

In addition to my Department's funding schemes, all services can currently participate in the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) which provides an average of 50% of normal operating costs for services, at a value of some €35m to the sector each month. The EWSS has been paid at enhanced rates since October 2020, and is due to continue until the end of December 2021. Most businesses must demonstrate a 30% reduction in turnover to be eligible for supports under the scheme. When the EWSS was introduced in August 2020, I negotiated a special arrangement for registered ELC and SAC services to be exempt from this turnover test and I can confirm that these special arrangements will be extended for Quarter 3 of 2021. Officials in my Department are engaging with the Department of Finance in the context of wider proposals for the EWSS in Quarter 4.

I recognise that early learning and care and school age childcare services are private businesses and are free to set their own policies regarding the charging of fees and contract conditions and I am aware that there are service providers notifying parents of a future significant increase in fees. Given the substantial additional supports allocated to the sector, and the assurance that there will be no sudden withdrawal of Government supports, there is no case for an increase to fees paid by parents.

I might add that where providers require further financial assistance in addition to current supports available, my Department operates a Covid-19 Impact Support Scheme. I would urge providers to apply for funding under this Scheme before taking steps to increase fees charged.

For parents who might wish to find an alternative provider, there are 30 City/County Childcare Committees around the country who can assist in identifying services in their areas. Information on these is available at [myccc.ie](http://myccc.ie). Information on services registered with Tusla, including contact details and inspection reports, is available on Tusla's website.

There are a number of measures in place to ensure affordability for parents. Families may be entitled to subsidies under the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), which aims to improve outcomes for children, reduce poverty, facilitate labour activation, and tangibly reduce the cost of early learning and childcare for tens of thousands of families. The scheme comprises of two types of subsidies:

- A universal subsidy for children of pre-ECCE age who are availing of early learning and childcare services from an approved provider. The universal subsidy is not means-tested and is available to all qualifying families of any income level.

- An income-assessed subsidy is payable for children from 24 weeks to 15 years of age who are availing of early learning and childcare services from an approved provider. The level of subsidy is determined by the family's reckonable income.

NCS subsidies are awarded as an hourly rate for a maximum number of hours per week.

Where parents are not engaged in work or study, the NCS subsidises up to 20 hours per week. Where parents are engaged in work or study, the NCS subsidises up to 45 hours per week. The definition of work or study is broad, covering all forms of work or study arrangements, and engagement in work or study for just 2 hours confers entitlement to higher maximum hours of subsidised provision. This makes the scheme as flexible as possible.

Looking to the future, my Department will be developing a new funding model for early learning and care and school age childcare that provides additional resourcing to services subject to quality and affordability. An Expert Group has been progressing this work since late 2019 and I expect their report to be finalised in November. An essential and top priority for this Group will be to make recommendations on a mechanism to control fee rates for different types of provision for ELC/SAC.

Extensive research has already been commissioned to inform the work of the Group. Frontier Economics, the Research Partner, have produced and published eight working papers, with three that directly address affordability issues including international comparisons of fees and public investment, approaches to funding the early learning and care sector, and mechanisms to control fees charged to parents. This research identifies international practice and learning that will be of value for the new funding model.

### **Childcare Services**

182. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the steps he will take to regulate the pricing structure of the creche system and to address the fact that not all creches or childcare providers accept the national childcare scheme subsidy, the high cost of insurance facing the childcare industry, the low wages of those working in the childcare sector, the lack of creche spaces and long waiting lists in many areas including Dublin 8 and the shortage of places for children under one year. [32195/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** One of my key priorities as Minister is to achieve affordability of quality early learning and care (ELC) and school age childcare (SAC) for families.

With regard to the question of **the cost of childcare**, the Programme for Government commits to substantially reducing fees to parents while supporting quality service provision. My Department has established an Expert Group which is currently carrying out a review of the funding model for ELC and SAC. This Group will report to me later this year, and its report will inform the development of a new funding model for ELC and SAC, which delivers affordable, quality provision of early learning and care to families.

My Department has provided substantial additional supports to allow ELC and SAC services to operate sustainably throughout the pandemic. One of the key objectives of these supports was to ensure that the potential higher delivery costs due to public health requirements and lower occupancy rates were not passed on to parents. Among these supports is the EWSS, which at enhanced rates, covers up to 80% of staff costs, or 50% of operating costs of services.

With regard to **service providers engaging with the National Childcare Scheme (NCS)**, providers are private business and it is their choice to provide any of my Department’s funding programmes, including the NCS.

However, I strongly encourage every provider to participate in the NCS, to enable parents to access the financial supports for early learning and childcare costs which are available to them through the NCS. In advance of the launch of the NCS, my Department provided a suite of

supports to ELC and SAC providers including training, transition payments and a capital grant for ICT equipment, to assist with the administration of the NCS. These supporting measures were designed to encourage sign-up, support readiness and facilitate the smooth operation of the NCS.

My Department provides an annual programme support payment (PSP) to compensate providers for the time they have to devote to the administration of DCEDIY funding schemes, including the NCS. Training and support on registering for the NCS is available for providers from all City/County Childcare Committees (CCCs) and from Pobal, the scheme administrator.

At present, over 3,000 ELC and SAC providers are contracted to participate in the NCS. My Department will launch a communications campaign on the NCS in the next month, which will encourage more providers to sign up for the NCS, and also inform parents of the supports which they can receive under this scheme.

I do appreciate the difficulties caused when a parent's preferred provider does not engage with the NCS. However, parents can access their NCS subsidy through any ELC and SAC provider which is registered to provide the NCS. Their CHICK number, which unlocks their subsidy award, can be used in any NCS-registered ELC and SAC service.

As the Deputy is aware, the DCEDIY funds a national network of City/County Childcare Committees (CCCs) to support and assist families and early learning and childcare providers. A parent's local CCC will be in a position to provide them with information and assistance with locating a suitable service or childminder in their area that is participating in the NCS. Further information on CCCs can be found at [www.myccc.ie](http://www.myccc.ie).

With regard to **the cost of insurance**, I understand that there has been a slight increase in brokerage fees for the majority of ELC and SAC providers this year, but that there has not been a general increase in premiums for providers. I understand that insurance costs remain at an average of €60 per child per annum for full time providers.

Neither the Government or the Central Bank of Ireland can direct the pricing or provision of insurance products, as this is a commercial matter which individual companies assess on a case-by-case basis. This position is reinforced by the EU Single Market framework for insurance (the Solvency II Directive) which expressly prohibits Member States from doing so.

Notwithstanding this, insurance reform is a priority for this Government. The Action Plan for Insurance Reform, which was launched on 8 December 2020, contains a range of deliverables in a number of Government Department policy areas. It is intended that the cumulative effect of the implementation of the actions will be to improve the insurance environment, in particular for businesses. I am a member of the Sub-Group for Insurance Reform, chaired by An Tánaiste, which has been set up within the Cabinet Committee for Economic Recovery and Investment to implement these reforms – the sub-group will publish progress reports every six months.

Seeking to secure a more sustainable and competitive market through deepening and widening the supply of insurance in Ireland remains a key policy priority for this Government. In this regard, it is the Government's intention to ensure that the implementation of the Action Plan can have a positive impact on the affordability and availability of insurance for individuals, businesses and voluntary groups, including ELC and SAC providers.

With regard to the **pay of staff in early learning and childcare services**, I am very conscious of the need for improvement in pay and working conditions in the sector.

As the State does not employ early learning and childcare practitioners, the Deputy will ap-

preciate that my Department cannot set wage levels or determine working conditions for staff in the sector. My Department has, however, over a number of years provided a range of supports to service providers to enable them to improve wages and working conditions.

In December 2020, I began a process to examine the possibility of regulating the pay and conditions of employment of practitioners in early learning and childcare, and to examine the suitability of establishing a Joint Labour Committee (JLC) for the sector, in line with the Programme for Government commitment. On foot of this process, the Minister of State for Business, Employment and Retail has written to the Labour Court, who are currently examining whether to establish a JLC. If established, a JLC could lead to an Employment Regulation Order, which would establish binding rates of pay and conditions for the sector.

Work on the new funding model is relevant here. The recommendations of a dedicated Expert Group are due later in 2021 and will be central to addressing both affordability and quality issues. The Expert Group's Draft Guiding Principles to underpin a new funding model recognise the importance of the workforce in delivering quality services.

Finally, work on the Workforce Development Plan continues, with final outputs expected by the end of the year. This is expected to include plans for making careers in early learning and childcare more attractive.

With regard to the to **the availability of early learning and childcare places**, my Department monitors the supply of, and demand for, ELC and SAC places annually through the Early Years Sector Profile report. This survey is conducted by Pobal on behalf of the Department.

Published data from the Sector Profile for the 2018/2019 programme year indicates that existing early learning and childcare provision, in general, meets current needs nationwide in terms of capacity whilst recognising that small pockets of under supply may exist within this.

Nationally the vacancy rate in 2018/19 was 6%, which was an increase from 5% in the previous year. Dublin City had a vacancy rate of 4% in 2018/2019, no change from 4% in 2017/2018.

Capacity data is not available for 2019/2020 owing to the impact of Covid-19 on supply and demand for services, however the nation network of CCCs have been working to monitor the availability of ELC and SAC places during Covid-19. I understand from their valuable work, and from engagements I have had with representatives of the early learning and childcare sector, that the pandemic as resulted in a reduction in demand for ELC and SAC places, in particular for after-school care.

With regard to the **availability of places for babies**, the Sector Profile shows that while there are vacancies in centre-based care for babies, they may not be available nationwide. The national network of CCCs can advise parents of the availability of centre-based care in their locality, and also of other options, such as childminders.

It is my intention to provide increased support to parents to enable them to have the choice of looking after their children at home up to the age of one. This commitment is set out in First 5, in the first Strategic Action 1.1: *Facilitate mothers and fathers to care for their child at home during their first year*. My Department is overseeing the introduction of a range of measures across Government to support this commitment.

My Department will continue to actively monitor supply and demand, and will continue to build on the progress achieved over the past decade in order to ensure that ELC and SAC services are accessible, affordable and high-quality, for all age ranges.

## Youth Services

183. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will consider funding multisystemic therapy for an organisation (details supplied). [32310/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The issue raised by the Deputy is a matter for Tusla - the Children and Family Agency and the question has been forwarded to them for direct response to the Deputy.

## Youth Services

184. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will consider funding additional posts (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32311/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I wish to advise the Deputy that this is an operational matter for Tusla and my officials have asked the Agency to respond directly to you on this matter.

## Childcare Services

185. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if a review can be accepted in exceptional circumstances for a person (details supplied) to resolve a national childcare scheme issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32323/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** While the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) is an initiative of my Department, a Scheme Administrator has been engaged to manage the operation of the Scheme on my Department’s behalf. Pobal acts in this capacity as Scheme Administrator, and it is their role to follow up on individual cases. We would ask that Parents using the NCS be advised to direct queries in relation to applications and the operation of the NCS to Pobal as the Scheme Administrator who are best placed to address them promptly.

My Department has referred this query to Pobal, who confirmed that the first start date of a subsidy awarded to this parent was from 2 November 2020.

NCS subsidies are not paid from the date of application. Rather, NCS subsidies can only be paid once an application has been completed, a CHICK has been registered with a childcare provider and the parent confirms on the system that all details are correct. This measure ensures that public funding is safeguarded and that the investment is following the child.

The parent in question submitted their first application on 19 October 2020, the subsidy was not confirmed from that date. There are a number of steps that take place once an application has been submitted. As the income of both parties is processed, a partner must be given a window to raise an objection to the processing of this data. As such, the income assessment did not begin for this parent until 26 October 2020, and the award commenced on next available payment week starting Monday, 2 November 2020. Email notifications are issued to all applicants whenever they are required to take action to progress their application. In total the entire application process including the week the matter was with the applicant’s partner took 2 weeks.

Furthermore, the applicant only confirmed three of the four child registrations; a registration is where the provider registers the child with their service and parents confirm the registration. The parent must confirm registrations before subsidies can be drawn down by the provider.

With regard to the fees charged by the crèche in question, the NCS subsidises parents for the cost of their childcare. Childcare providers set their own fees, sessions and admissions policies. My Department has no role in determining the fees charged by childcare providers.

Regarding HSE employees benefitting from the NCS, we are aware of the issue you raise caused by the cybersecurity attack and have made provision for it, to ensure HSE staff can still be awarded a NCS subsidy. Any HSE employee who has queries and need assistance with this issue should contact National Childcare Scheme Parent Support Centre Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm on 01 906 8530..

Once the period for requesting a review has lapsed, it is not possible for an applicant or a childcare service provider to request a review.

My Department has asked Pobal to contact the parent and the childcare provider in question directly to provide assistance and answer any questions they may have.

The NCS Parent Support line is available to assist parents, and can be contacted by phone at 01 906 8530, Monday to Friday 9am to 5pm.

### **Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries**

186. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the way in which his Department is facilitating and addressing subject data access requests by survivors of institutional abuse; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32477/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Former residents of Mother and Baby Homes can make a Subject Access Request (SAR) to my Department for access to their record. My Department is cognisant of its obligations as a data controller when responding to SARs and is responding on a case by case basis to individuals within the timeframes required by the GDPR.

GDPR provides that the one month period for SARs may be extended by a further two months where necessary, taking into account the complexity of the request. The data controller is obliged to inform the data subject of any such extension within one month of the receipt of the request including the reasons for the delay. The deadline for responding to SARs commences from the time the identity of the requestor is verified. My Department is responding to SARs in accordance with its GDPR obligations and engages with each data subject in relation to the progress of their request.

The right of a person to obtain a copy of their personal data, contained in Article 15 of the GDPR, is not absolute. It is specifically limited by reference to the rights of others, which must not be adversely affected by the right of a data subject to obtain a copy of their personal data. Therefore, in responding to a SAR, my Department must consider the rights of the data subject and also ensure that the rights and freedoms of others are not adversely affected. The consideration of adverse effects and the balancing of rights test is a critical part of the SAR process and can be highly complex. My Department also has regard to relevant Regulations such as S.I. No. 82/89 – Data Protection (Access Modification) (Health) Regulations, 1989 where health data is included in a record.

My Department, in consultation with the Attorney General, developed guidelines which set out the steps that must be taken in response to each subject access request.

In order to assist the processing of subject access requests and to vindicate the rights of data subjects, my Department has put in place a multi-disciplinary team which includes legal and data protection expertise. In addition, my Department has engaged external data protection consultants to support the processing of SARs.

Information relevant to making a SAR is available on my Department's website. The web-page also includes a detailed guide to making a SAR that provides responses to Frequently Asked Questions. The guide includes information on the different means available to make a SAR such as by email, post or other means.

In addition, my Department also operates a dedicated telephone information line which provides information to callers on procedures for making a SAR in respect of records relating to the Mother and Baby Home Commission of Investigation.

### **Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries**

187. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the status of the redress scheme for the survivors of mother and baby homes and related institutions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32478/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Deputy will be aware that, as part of its response to the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes (and Certain Related Matters), the Government committed to establishing a Restorative Recognition Scheme for survivors of Mother and Baby and County Home institutions. This scheme will include a restorative recognition payment and a form of enhanced medical card.

An Interdepartmental Group (IDG) was set up to develop detailed proposals for the Restorative Recognition Scheme, which must then be brought to Government for approval. While the IDG must take account of the recommendations of the Commission, its considerations are not limited to those recommendations. The work of the IDG is underpinned by a human rights focus and informed by consultation with survivors.

To support and inform the work of the IDG, a public consultation process took place during March and April. The input from survivors to that consultation is invaluable in order to develop a scheme that will have their needs at its core. I was delighted with the strong response to the consultation process with approximately 450 written submissions received and 17 online meetings held. The report of the consultation process was submitted to the IDG on the 17th May.

The work of the IDG is almost complete and they will deliver their report to me very soon. On receipt of this, I will submit recommendations to Government for a decision on the Scheme.

### **Domestic Violence**

188. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the estimated cost of providing an additional 331 domestic abuse refuge spaces to meet Ireland's obligations under the Istanbul Convention; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32479/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The response to Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence (DSGBV) is a cross Departmental and multi-agency issue, with overall policy coordinated by the Department of Justice. Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, has statutory responsibility for the care and protection of victims of DSGBV. Capital funding for approved housing bodies, including services that provide refuge accommodation, is currently provided by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) sets out signatory obligations but does not set out a standard or recommended number of refuges. With regard to the provision of shelter for victims, a policy document “Combating Violence Against Women: Minimum Standards for Support Services”, published by the Council, references two possible standards depending on the types of service provision in place. Tusla has applied the standard of one shelter space per 10,000 head of female population, with specific mechanisms for measuring population and calculation of shelter spaces. This standard applied by Tusla, reflects the community-focused integrated response for victims, where community-based organisations and outreach supports are in place alongside refuges.

Tusla has previously advised this Department that the cost of maintaining a single refuge space is in the region of €100,000 annually. Accordingly, the provision of 331 additional spaces would require an additional €33.1 million on an annual basis. This would not include the initial capital costs for the development of these additional spaces.

With regard to emergency accommodation for victims of DSGBV, Tusla is undertaking a review of these services nationwide. This will assess the current and requisite distribution of safe emergency accommodation. The review’s findings and the recommendations of the Monitoring Committee of the Second National Strategy on DSGBV will inform Tusla’s future decisions on priority areas for investment and development of services. Tusla has advised me that this report will be finalised in the coming weeks.

*Question No. 189 answered with Question No. 179.*

### **Childcare Services**

190. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his response to an organisation (details supplied) withdrawing from the process to create recommendations for the childminding role profile, features of fountain training and childminding network leader; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32481/21]

**Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** My Department developed a National Action Plan for Childminding which was published in April 2021. The Action Plan aims to improve access, through childminding, to high quality and affordable childcare. The Action Plan sets out a pathway over the next 8 years towards regulation, support and subsidies for all paid, non-relative childminders. The Action Plan will involve change and will bring significant benefits for childminders, and for the children and the families using their services.

A National Action Plan for Childminding Steering Group will be established shortly, to drive, oversee and monitor implementation of the National Action Plan. The Steering Group will be supported by four Advisory Groups in relation to: regulation and inspection; training and support; funding and financial supports; and consultation and communications.



The National Action Plan commits to representation of childminders, parents and other key stakeholders on the Steering Group, which will be chaired by my Department. Additionally the National Action Plan commits to representation of childminders on all four Advisory Groups.

Initial work on drafting a role profile for childminders and childminding network leaders and the features of a foundation training programme began prior to the launch of the National Action Plan, in the context of on-going work on developing a Workforce Development Plan for early learning and care and school-age childcare. In order to draft proposals, a working group was established specifically on childminding. The working group has strong representation of childminding views. Of its 12 members, six are childminders or work exclusively with or for childminders, while other members represent the views of parents, the statutory regulator (Tusla) and organisations which have provided extensive support for childminders. All decisions on the design and implementation of training programmes for childminders will be made by the Steering Group of the National Action Plan for Childminding.

The National Action Plan itself was based on extensive consultation and engagement with childminders, and the blueprint for the National Action Plan was the 2018 report of the Working Group on Reforms and Supports for the Childminding Sector, which was coordinated and chaired by Childminding Ireland. The National Action Plan commits to further consultation with childminders, especially during Phase 1 of the Plan when developing regulations specific to childminders.

Officials in my Department have been engaging with the organisation in question on their specific concerns. While discussions are ongoing, I am hopeful that all relevant organisations that have a significant role in representing or supporting childminders will be actively involved in the oversight and advisory structures for the National Action Plan.

### **Education and Training Provision**

191. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the funding that will be provided to deliver 50,000 education and training places to support upskilling and reskilling for the labour market outlined in the Economic Recovery Plan 2021. [32268/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** The Economic Recovery Plan 2021 recognised that the accelerated provision of 50,000 education and training places in reskilling and upskilling is a central piece in addressing the employment transition of people who have been displaced by the impact of the current pandemic and in key skills priorities.

These places are being funded from the National Training Fund through €100 million that was allocated in the July Jobs Stimulus and through a further €118.5 million that was provided for in Budget 2021 for the continuation of the Stimulus package and for additional skills places.

This upskilling and reskilling is taking place across a wide range of provision including the SOLAS Skills to Compete initiative, Skillnet Ireland courses, Springboard+, and modular and postgraduate courses in Higher Education.

### **Overseas Study Placements**

192. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Re-

search, Innovation and Science if an analysis has been carried by his Department of the expenditure of stamp two visa holders while studying in Ireland; if an analysis has been done on the income of stamp two visa holders in which all working time rules are followed and an attendance rate of over 85% is maintained over three eight month periods in an English language school; and if the expenditure is greater than the highest potential income of students who work to fund their study, if consideration will be given to removing limits on working hours in order that workers can meet their expenditure while staying within the working limit rules. [32396/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** No such analyses are currently underway.

A series of reforms to the student immigration system for international education were implemented in 2015. The reforms were designed to drive real and lasting change in the sector and address abuse of the immigration regime and labour market, improve the overall quality of educational offering to international students, and improve protection and supports for learners, whilst safeguarding the strong international reputation of high-quality Irish education providers consistent with the goals of Ireland's International Education Strategy.

The primary purpose of the Stamp 2 immigration permission is to enable non-EEA students to travel to Ireland to avail of educational opportunities and in the case of the sector in question, to study English. To pursue their studies, English language students can avail of up to three Stamp 2 immigration permissions, each of 8 months duration, to a maximum of two years. As part of each 8 month permission, a student enrolls on an English language programme which meets the requirements of the Interim List of Eligible Programmes (ILEP), which is at least 25 weeks in duration and which provides a minimum of 15 classroom tuition hours per week led by an appropriately qualified teacher. The class attendance requirements linked to this permission are key to underpinning the integrity of English language provision.

While primarily for the purpose of study, this permission also allows Stamp 2 holders to work while in the State subject to clearly stated conditions. Students may take up employment which enables them to work up to 20 hours a week during term time and up to 40 hours a week during designated holiday periods.

Following the initial outbreak of Covid-19, it was recognised that English language students may be particularly vulnerable and face a distinct set of issues arising from the pandemic. These issues include a language barrier when accessing information, concerns surrounding their immigration conditions and the potential loss of employment. In March 2020, my Department established a specific Working Group for the English language education (ELE) sector to address these issues. This group is comprised of the sectoral representatives of students, staff and providers alongside representatives of relevant Government Departments such as the Department of Justice, the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Social Protection. It has met 12 times to date.

In the course of its work, this Working Group has published and enabled the dissemination of material for students to provide information on health advice, updates on new immigration measures as they have been introduced, and to advise them of their eligibility to apply for relevant social protection supports such as the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment. In its engagements to date, the Working Group has also addressed questions surrounding access to Government services such as Personal Public Service Numbers (PPSNs) for students and clarified public health advice and supports for students who may reside in accommodation where social distancing and self-isolation may be challenging or not possible.

In relation to the loss of employment, the key social protection measure that is available to

ELE students is the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP). The PUP was introduced by Government and made available to employees and the self-employed who lost their job on or after 13 March 2020. ELE students and their representative bodies have been advised of the details of the PUP scheme alongside their eligibility to apply for it. In addition to the PUP, and in exceptional circumstances, ELE student have also been advised where they are experiencing a financial need that they cannot meet out of their weekly income they are also eligible to apply for the Exceptional Needs Payment which is available via the Department of Social Protection.

Clarity surrounding the immigration permissions of ELE students has also been provided by the Department of Justice. As the pandemic has developed and evolved, a number of updates in respect of the status of immigration permissions for International Students have been announced. The most recent update was provided in March 2021 announcing that relevant permissions are being automatically extended to 20 September 2021 including for English language students. The conditions attached to these renewed permissions are unchanged. Therefore, ELE students may take up or continue employment on the same basis as before.

Student welfare has been the key driver of my Department's response to the pandemic to date and my officials will continue to engage with ELE students representatives, via the ELE Working Group, to focus on student issues as this sector prepares to move towards the resumption of in-person activity, in line with public health guidelines, when it is safe to do so.

The planned establishment of the International Education Mark is intended to underpin a high quality ELE sector in Ireland that safeguards the interests of students and ensures that that the educational function of the ELE sector which is the teaching and learning of valuable English language proficiency is the mainstay of its future direction consistent with the objectives of the 2015 reforms.

### **Overseas Study Placements**

193. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if consideration will be given to a reversion to the 12 month duration for English language stamp two visas in order to help students who work while studying in English language education schools given all English language education stamp two visas lasted 12 months until 2015 before moving to 8 months. [32397/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Since the Covid-19 pandemic was declared in March 2020, the Minister for Justice has announced extensions to immigration permissions, including for English language students, on a number of occasions. The most recent announcement has extended relevant permissions until 20 September 2021.

The primary purpose of the Stamp 2 immigration permission is to enable non-EEA students to travel to Ireland to avail of educational opportunities and in the case of the sector in question, to study English.

In September 2014, a policy statement entitled "Regulatory Reform of the International Education Sector and the Student Immigration Regime" was launched jointly by the then Minister for Education and Skills and Minister for Justice and Equality. The document contained a series of reforms considered necessary to address significant problems in part of Ireland's private college sector. During 2014, some 10 colleges closed their doors and over 3,000, mainly non-EEA, students were left without the education programmes for which they had paid. There

were concerns as to the level of immigration abuse in the sector at that time, leading to the publication of Reform of the International Education Sector and Student Immigration System, Government Policy Statement, May 2015.

On this basis, a series of reforms to the student immigration system for international education were implemented in 2015. The reforms were designed to drive real and lasting change in the sector and address abuse of the immigration regime and labour market, improve the overall quality of educational offering to international students, and improve protection and supports for learners, whilst safeguarding the strong international reputation of high-quality Irish education providers consistent with the goals of Ireland's International Education Strategy. One key reform was the introduction of the Interim List of Eligible Programmes (ILEP), a more restrictive list of education programmes eligible for student immigration purposes.

Previously a student studying an English language programme of 25 weeks (375 hours tuition) was granted a full 12 months immigration permission. In 2015 it was agreed that this situation was no longer tenable and was regarded as contributing to some of the problems in the sector. Consequently, the general student permission for attending a 375 hour plus language programme was reduced to 8 months i.e. approximately 34-35 weeks. A non-EEA student can obtain up to three such Stamp 2 permissions studying English Language up to a maximum of two years.

This permission enables Stamp 2 holders to both study and work while in the State subject to the conditions of the Interim List of Eligible Programmes (ILEP) Scheme. Students may take up employment which enables them to work up to 20 hours a week during the traditional academic term and up to 40 hours a week during designated holiday periods. These holiday periods have been standardised as the 1st June to 31st September and the 15th December to 15th January of each year. Therefore, under current conditions, ELE students who hold a Stamp 2 immigration permission can now work in Ireland for up to 40 hours per week until the end of September.

The Department understands from engagement with provider representatives that the majority of English language students enrol on 25 week programmes that predominately operate outside of the designated holiday periods therefore facilitating their ability to work fulltime over holiday periods. However, where students have enrolled on programmes scheduled during these periods, students are obliged to continue to meet their attendance requirements, aligned with conditions for ILEP.

The planned establishment of the International Education Mark is intended to underpin a high quality ELE sector in Ireland that safeguards the interests of students and ensures that the educational function of the ELE sector which is the teaching and learning of valuable English language proficiency is the mainstay of its future direction consistent with the objectives of the 2015 reforms.

### **Third Level Fees**

194. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he plans to review the current level of fees for third-level courses. [32233/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** In considering fees, it is important to note that the State currently provides very substantial financial support to undergraduate students in higher education towards the

cost of their studies.

This commitment is demonstrated through the high level of fees support amounting to in excess of €500m per annum provided by the State for large numbers of students participating in higher education. This comprises tuition fee funding via the Free Fees Schemes under which the Exchequer currently contributes €340m to meeting the tuition fee costs of almost 140,000 eligible undergraduate students in higher education. All students eligible for the scheme receive state support whereby the Exchequer pays the cost of tuition fees exclusive of the student contribution. In addition, over 60,000 students have all or part of the €3,000 student contribution paid on their behalf under the Student Grant Scheme at a cost of over €180m.

This substantial funding support has played a very important role in enabling access to and growth in higher education in Ireland.

In terms of the future position, my Department's Statement of Strategy, which I published on 8 March last contains a commitment to put in place a sustainable funding model for higher education. This is essential in ensuring that our higher education institutions can effectively meet high standards of quality and performance, and achieve critical outcomes for our economy and society.

A comprehensive economic evaluation of the funding options contained in the Cassells Review was commissioned by the European Commission and undertaken by independent expert consultants. This review is currently being finalised.

I look forward to the completion of the funding review which will provide the basis for determining how best additional investment in higher education can meet future requirements, in particular in supporting access to higher education in terms of the totality of the costs of participation. This is an essential to meeting a core objective of my mission as Minister is that everyone regardless of their background, age, gender, or address achieves their best potential.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

195. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the process that will be undertaken by his Department for the procurement of antigen tests for third-level institutions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32242/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The intention of Government is to strengthen the prevention and intervention measures around COVID-19 in response to the changing context including surveillance, track and trace, and potential use of new technology. My Department recognises that as one part of a package of surveillance and vigilance measures, including other public health non-pharmaceutical interventions, there is a potential role for rapid antigen testing.

My Department has provided its support to the initiation of a Science Foundation Ireland study to test this objective. A new research project, 'Multi-site study to develop a SARS-CoV-2 Infection Surveillance System for Third Level Students and Staff in the Republic of Ireland', known as UniCoV, begins this week across four universities.

It is intended that the outcomes of this research project will inform the development of early warning systems for future outbreak prevention and control. It is also intended that the outcomes of this research project will inform SARS-CoV-2 infection rapid testing and surveillance systems in further and Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in Ireland.

Should the study recommend use of antigen tests in third-level institutions, all relevant procurement guidelines will be complied with, as appropriate.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

196. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the plans he and his Department have for the safe return of schools for lecturers and students for the next academic year in respect of indoor ventilation to combat the Covid-19 pandemic taking account of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment's recently published Work Safety Protocol; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32302/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Following Government approval, I have published A Safe Return: Plan for a safe return to on-site Further and Higher Education and Research in 2021/22. The Safe Return Plan can be accessed here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/bcd91-a-safe-return-to-on-site-further-and-higher-education-and-research/>

The Plan reflects the essential nature of higher and further education and training, and research activities, and in that context, provides for comprehensive on-site activity for the next academic year, with almost full scale on-site activities.

At a very minimum, workshops, tutorials, classroom based activities and smaller lectures will be allowed and libraries, research facilities and labs will be opened. Institutions and providers will continue to put in place plans to ensure that the overall number of people on campus at a given time continues to be moderated.

Under the Plan, larger scale lectures will take place on-site if the public health situation continues to improve as expected but some moderation in numbers may still be required. The safety measures which will be in place such as social distancing, face masks and indoor ventilation will be in accordance with prevailing public health advice taking into account the essential nature of further and higher education and research.

In addition, contingency planning based on a more restrictive public health environment is also being prepared by the sector. Even in a more restrictive public health environment, it is envisaged that there would still be significant on-site activities.

The Plan will operate along with and be supported by:

- The COVID-19 Adaptation Framework for further and higher education
- The Practical Guidance for Further and Higher Education (to be updated in line with prevailing public health advice).
- Sectoral guidance (to be updated in line with prevailing public health advice)
- The Sectoral Pact as outlined in Section 5 of the plan
- The Work Safety Protocol published by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
- The Government Plan - COVID – 19 Resilience and Recovery: The Path Ahead

In the interim period leading to the return in autumn 2021, sectoral planning will be re-

viewed monthly with an update on planning to be provided to Government in July. This will ensure that there is ongoing support for planning in this sector and that planning proceeds in a manner that is aligned to prevailing public health advice.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

197. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the measures he is considering to allow for the resumption of face-to-face classes for the English language education sector; if he will engage with stakeholders in this sector to ensure that the reopening of this sector is done in a collaborative way; if he has considered a vaccine passport dedicated to foreign students; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32305/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** In March 2020, my Department established a distinct Working Group with key stakeholders for the English Language Education (ELE) sector to manage the significant impact of the pandemic on ELE. This Working Group is comprised of the sectoral representatives of students, staff and providers alongside representatives of relevant Government Departments such as the Department of Justice, the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Social Protection.

This Working Group is planning for a limited, safe return of on-site activity, which comprises small group in-person learning to cater exclusively for needs of the existing cohort of ELE students currently in the State. This approach for on-site activity is consistent with small group learning across further, higher and adult education. To enable this to happen, all existing restrictions and public health guidance with appropriate protective measures and limited congregation will be followed supported by reopening protocols and an adaptation framework that are aligned with public health guidelines to facilitate and ensure the safe return to classroom activity for this cohort of students. The Working Group has worked collaboratively to develop these sectoral reopening protocols and supporting materials and this work is now nearing finalisation.

This approach notes the sector is much reduced with estimates placing student numbers at less than 10,000 currently in the State in comparison to pre-pandemic levels where the sector has capacity to facilitate approximately 200,000 foreign learners annually.

Prospective ELE learners in the State not previously enrolled and students who are not currently in the country are not included in these planned on site activities.

ELE providers have been advised that there remains no basis for the recruitment of new international students who might travel to the country at this time. However, the initial resumption of in-person activity will represent a key step on the pathway to recovery for the ELE sector in Ireland. My Department will continue to engage with ELE stakeholders as this sector moves, aligned with public health advice, including any such advice in relation to international travel, towards its full re-opening and continues on a path to recovery.

### **Legislative Measures**

198. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will consider an amendment to the Technological Universities Act 2018 for section 12(j) to be amended to increase the number of education and training board nominees onto each technological university's governing body from one to three

nominees. [32312/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** On 6 May I published the general scheme for new legislation aimed at reforming and modernising governance of the Higher Education sector. The proposed Higher Education Act 2021 will allow for strong internal governance of universities, technological universities and institutes of technology by reforming the size and composition of their governing bodies. Head 90 of the general scheme proposes amendment of Section 12 of the Technological Universities Act 2018 which provides for the membership of governing body of a technological university (TU). In order to support the objectives of the legislation to achieve effective and efficient governance, the governing bodies of TUs shall be significantly smaller than under current provisions. All external members are to be appointed using a skills based competency framework with consideration of experience and expertise relating to matters connected with the functions of the technological university to enable them to make a substantial contribution to the effective and efficient performance of those functions, or matters connected to education, teaching and learning, research, international perspectives, organisational and financial governance, management or public administration.

While the proposed reforming provision does not reference Education and Training Board (ETB) membership of a TU governing body explicitly it will be open to ETB members to seek nomination to the governing bodies of TUs in accordance with the procedures for nomination which will be put in place.

The reformed Higher Education Authority (HEA) legislation will provide for a co-regulation approach to governance such that each higher education institution (HEI) has primary responsibility for governance within an overall performance and regulatory framework including a clear accountability and reporting requirement to the HEA. This co-regulation model requires strong internal governance in HEIs. To secure strong internal governance, the governing bodies of HEIs should be of a size to allow for effective oversight. As proposed membership shall be predominantly competency-based rather than representational and a strong external component to membership of governing bodies is required if they are to provide genuine accountability. This aligns with the National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 which recommended that HEI governing authorities should have a smaller number of members, with the majority external members and membership should be competency based.

In parallel with a move towards governing bodies that are smaller, more competency based and with a greater balance of external non-executive input, the legislation will seek to put in place effective consultation structures within HEIs and the higher education system to maintain a strong voice for stakeholders.

### **Departmental Expenditure**

199. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the total expenditure on student support services in further education in each year since 2011; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32513/21]

200. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the estimated cost of providing student support service in further education that is comparable to higher education; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32514/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, In-**



**novation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 199 and 200 together.

The information requested by the Deputy is currently being compiled. I will arrange for an early response to issue directly to the Deputy.

*Question No. 200 answered with Question No. 199.*

### **Scientific Research**

201. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the estimated cost to the Exchequer of Ireland becoming a full member of CERN; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32515/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Based on the most recent indications received from CERN, the cost of Ireland's full membership at current prices would be circa €13.2 million annually.

In addition to the annual full membership cost there is a 'special contribution' fee calculated as 1.25 times the cost of the full membership fee. Based on a cost of €13.2 million this would amount to a special contribution fee of €16.5 million.

Therefore, the total initial full membership cost would be €29.7 million comprising the annual full membership fee and the special contribution fee.

### **Departmental Expenditure**

202. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the current expenditure on literacy including digital numeracy and English language supports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32516/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Adult literacy provision is delivered through a number of dedicated programmes including adult literacy groups and intensive tuition in adult basic education. One of the strategic priorities of the FET Strategy 2020-2024 is fostering inclusion with particular focus on literacy and numeracy supports to ensure the needs of learners are met. The funding allocated in 2021 for literacy, numeracy, digital and English language supports is €37,546,859.

The FET provision includes literacy, numeracy, digital and English language supports delivered in a range of settings catering for the diverse needs of learners.

### **Electric Vehicles**

203. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of electric or hybrid vehicles purchased by his Department in 2020 and to date in 2021, respectively in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32847/21]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I can confirm to the Deputy that my Department does not lease or own any vehicles including both electric or hybrid.

### Work Permits

204. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Justice the breakdown by nationality of the current holders of permits under the atypical scheme for non-EEA fishers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32146/21]

205. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Justice the breakdown by port of the location of the current holders of permits under the atypical scheme for non-EEA fishers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32147/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 204 and 205 together.

There are 227 valid permissions granted under the Atypical Working Scheme (AWS) for SeaFishers at present. This number represents all positive decision letters issued under the Scheme since late December 2019.

The table below sets out the breakdown by nationality of the current holders of AWS permits, as requested by the Deputy.

Philippines	111
Egypt	48
Ghana	28
Indonesia	28
Other nationalities	12
Total	227

My Department does not collate information regarding the home port of vessels. Information regarding vessels on which permission has been granted to work is provided on a regular basis to relevant stakeholders in other Departments and Agencies with responsibility for monitoring the fishing fleet such as the Workplace Relations Commission, the Marine Safety Office, and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

*Question No. 205 answered with Question No. 204.*

### Departmental Expenditure

206. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice the amount her Department has expended to date regarding awareness raising campaigns for Covid-19 in national newspapers. [32157/21]

207. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice the amount her Department has expended to date regarding awareness raising campaigns for Covid-19 in regional newspapers. [32158/21]

208. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice the amount her Department has expended to date regarding awareness raising campaigns for Covid-19 in national radio stations. [32159/21]

209. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice the amount her Department has expended to date regarding awareness raising campaigns for Covid-19 in regional radio stations. [32160/21]

210. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice the amount her Department has expended to date regarding awareness raising campaigns for Covid-19 in local radio stations. [32161/21]

211. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice the amount her Department has expended to date regarding awareness raising campaigns of Covid-19 on social media. [32162/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 206, 207, 208, 209, 210 and 211 together.

I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department has been working closely with all government departments to support the national COVID-19 effort. My Department has contributed to, and participated in, the large scale cross-Government communications programme which has been running since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This has involved supporting and amplifying Government and public health messaging through both our internal and external communications channels. There has been no spending by my Department on advertising directly related to COVID-19 during the period in question.

While not specifically a campaign to raise awareness of COVID-19, since March 2020 my Department has been running the important ‘Still Here’ campaign. This purpose of this campaign is to reassure victims of domestic abuse that support services from State agencies and the voluntary sector are still available and accessible during the COVID-19 pandemic, regardless of what level of restrictions are in place.

In addition to reminding victims of domestic abuse that help is ‘Still Here’, the campaign also reminds anyone concerned for their safety that the restrictions on movement do not apply to people at risk or who are removing themselves from a domestic abuse situation.

As requested by the Deputy, I have provided a breakdown of spending on this campaign by national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio stations, regional and local radio stations and social media.

Still Here Campaign	Spend
National Newspapers	€0.00
Regional Newspapers	€0.00
National Radio Stations	€59,792.14
Regional and Local Radio Stations	€66,002.39
Social Media	€0.00
Total Spend	€125,794.53

*Question No. 207 answered with Question No. 206.*

*Question No. 208 answered with Question No. 206.*

*Question No. 209 answered with Question No. 206.*

*Question No. 210 answered with Question No. 206.*

*Question No. 211 answered with Question No. 206.*

### Departmental Correspondence

212. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if she will publish and or

provide details of, or copies of all emails and hard correspondence received from an association (details supplied) seeking a statutory instrument to enable its annual conference to proceed; and if she was acting Minister or the Minister who discussed this SI with the Garda Commissioner in advance or post sign off on it. [32173/21]

**222. Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if she will provide all documents relating to lobbying or contact with her Department and An Garda Síochána in respect of a conference by an association (details supplied) including hard copies and text and or messages via an application. [32254/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 212 and 222 together.

As the Deputy will be aware from my response to question 667 of 18 May, the Statutory Regulations that govern the operation of the Garda Representative Association (GRA) provide that the Annual Delegate Conference (ADC) must take place not later than May in any year.

The ADC of the GRA could not be held in the usual in-person format before the end of May 2020 due to the public health guidelines which were introduced in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The GRA communicated with my Department during the course of 2020 in relation to the possibility of holding an ADC during the year, and the requirement for supporting Regulatory changes.

On foot of this, and in accordance with section 122 of the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Síochána (Associations) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (S.I. 605/2020) were made by Minister McEntee on 8 December 2020 in light of appropriate consultation between the Department of Justice and the Garda authorities.

As I informed the Deputy in my response to question 502 of 25 May, the correspondence between the GRA and my Department in this matter has been made available to the Deputy on 21 May. The specific form of messages the Deputy refers to were also included in these documents.

### **An Garda Síochána**

**213. Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice the basis for the 35 years' upper age limit for recruitment of new Garda members; if consideration will be given to the fact that this is out of line with recruitment rules that apply in other countries, for example, the UK; when the review on this matter will be published; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32182/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As the Deputy will be aware, recruitment to An Garda Síochána is governed by legislation, particularly the Garda Síochána (Admissions and Appointments) Regulations 2013. These Regulations provide that the maximum age at which a person may apply to join An Garda Síochána as a full time member is not more than 35 years.

I can inform the Deputy that an Expert Review Group has been established by the Garda Commissioner to examine the issue of Garda Recruitment, Entry Pathways and Recruit Education. This review is a commitment under *A Policing Service for our Future*, the Government's implementation plan for the recommendations of the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland. The Group will examine a variety of matters including the age of recruitment to An Garda Síochána. The Group, which operates in an advisory capacity, commenced

work in late 2020 with a view to submitting a report to the Garda Commissioner within 12 months. I expect that the Commissioner will engage further with the Minister at that point on foot of the Group's advice and analysis.

### **Drug Dealing**

214. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Justice if her attention has been drawn to the open drug dealing and intimidation of parents, pupils and staff at the gates of a school (details supplied); and if she will raise the matter with the Garda authorities and suggest that they dedicate the necessary resources to address the problem. [32192/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I have requested a report from the Garda authorities on the issues raised by the Deputy and I will contact him directly once the report is to hand.

### **Rights of Way**

215. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Justice her views on plans in relation to easements; her further views on the impact on rights of way and other properties of easements; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32220/21]

225. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Justice her plans to amend the Land and Conveyancing Law Reform Act 2009 in view of the difficulties created for home owners, particularly in rural locations, in registering rights of way; her plans to further extend section 38 of the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2011; her views on the submission made by the Law Society; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32381/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 215 and 225 together.

The Land and Conveyancing Law Reform Act 2009 provides for fundamental reform and modernisation of land law and conveyancing law and aims to simplify the law and the conveyancing process.

As the Deputy will be aware, this Act contains statutory provisions concerning the registration of easements. Part 8 updated the law concerning the acquisition of easements, including rights of way, based on recommendations of the Law Reform Commission.

The Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2011 also contains some amendments to this Act in this area. Rights of way can be created either through grant by deed between the owner of the subject land and the owner of the land intended to benefit from the right, or alternatively a right of way can be shown to have been acquired by prescription, which is the acquisition of such rights by the user as of right over a substantial period of time.

My Department has received correspondence on this issue from a number of stakeholders including a detailed submission in regards easements. My officials are currently in the process of evaluating this submission and have also arranged discussions with key stakeholders to discuss the issue.

### **Residency Permits**

216. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the procedure to be followed to regularise status in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32227/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** Based on the information supplied, it has unfortunately not been possible to locate the application for the person referred to by the Deputy. If more information can be provided, my officials will be happy to re-examine the Deputy's request.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility ([inisoireachtasmail@justice.ie](mailto:inisoireachtasmail@justice.ie)) which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

### **Residency Permits**

217. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the current residency status in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32230/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** The person referred to by the Deputy has a current permission to remain in the State, on stamp 4 conditions, up to 20 September 2021. Their permission was extended from its original expiry date of 8 July 2021, by the most recent temporary extension of immigration and international protection permissions announced on 26 March last. It will be open to the person concerned to apply for a further extension of the permission granted at her local immigration office.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility ([INISOireachtasMail@justice.ie](mailto:INISOireachtasMail@justice.ie)) which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

### **Departmental Reports**

218. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice when she will publish the finalised audit report of the existing structures into the segmentation of domestic sexual and gender-based violence across different Government agencies; and if the final audit report and recommendations have been made available to the relevant stakeholders. [32237/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** The Programme for Government commits to conducting an audit of how responsibility for Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence (DSGBV) is segmented across different government agencies and this important commitment is reiterated in Justice Plan 2021.

The audit has been undertaken by external consultants Mary Higgins and Ellen O'Malley-Dunlop in consultation with relevant NGOs and service providers, as well as input from Departments and agencies. The consultants were, as part of their work, also required to take account

of the views of those working at the frontline.

A draft report has been prepared and was recently submitted to both the Department of Children Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and to the Department of Justice and it has now been finalised and provided to me this week. I will discuss its recommendations with my colleague, Minister O’Gorman shortly.

The audit outcome, together with the ongoing work of implementing *Supporting a Victim’s Journey*, the current review of accommodation needs undertaken by Tusla, and the development of the next National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence, will provide us with valuable guidance for designing our systems to best meet the needs of victims of DSGBV and improve how we do this in the longer-term.

Tackling domestic abuse and ensuring we have the best possible infrastructure to support victims is a priority for me as Minister and for Government. I am working with my colleagues and with our partners to ensure we have an appropriate collective national response that supports victims and holds perpetrators to account.

### **An Garda Síochána**

219. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice her responsibilities and or role in respect of the legal framework of Garda staff associations. [32249/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda representative associations have been established to represent members of An Garda Síochána and their interests, for instance with regard to pay, pensions and conditions of employment.

I can inform the Deputy that section 122 of the Garda Síochána Act 2005 provides that the Minister may, after consulting with the Garda Commissioner and with the approval of the Government, make regulations for the management of the Garda Síochána, including regulations relating to the formation of Garda representative associations and matters relating to the role, status and carrying out of business within the Garda Síochána of those associations.

There are four Garda associations, each of which has been set up in accordance with regulations. A number of amendments to each of these regulations have been brought forward over time.

Any changes being made to existing regulations, or new regulations, require consultation with the Policing Authority and the Garda Commissioner and must be brought by the Minister for Justice to cabinet for approval.

### **Departmental Correspondence**

220. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the action that has been taken in respect of the letter of 15 December 2020 by the former president of the Garda Representative Association to the Minister for Justice (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32252/21]

221. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the nature of the responses to date received from the Garda Commissioner in respect of the letter of 15 December 2020 by the former president of the Garda Representative Association to the Minister for Justice which

he has been examining; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32253/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 220 and 221 together.

The Deputy will be aware from my response to parliamentary question 664 of 18 May that the correspondence of 15 December 2020 referred to by the Deputy was sent to the Garda Commissioner as it concerned matters relating to the internal governance of the association in question. I understand that the Commissioner will be responding to me shortly in this regard.

*Question No. 221 answered with Question No. 220.*

*Question No. 222 answered with Question No. 212.*

### **Juvenile Offenders**

223. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Justice if she will consider additional resources to allow an expansion of the Strive programme in Ballymun to allow more offenders to be included; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32308/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** As the Deputy may be aware the Joint Agency Response to Crime ('JARC') is an example of a strategic multi-agency initiative involving an intensive, highly collaborative approach to the supervision and rehabilitation of prolific offenders in particular areas of Dublin and beyond.

The three lead agencies (An Garda Síochána, the Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service) with the active support of my Department and in partnership with other State bodies and community-based organisations, work together in a close and highly structured manner to steer these recidivist offenders away from criminality.

The STRIVE project is a specific JARC initiative established in 2015 and targets the 20 most high-risk offenders, who are identified as causing the most harm in the community, using a coordinated approach with local stakeholders.

The Operational team in Strive includes representatives from the Probation Service, An Garda Síochána, the Irish Prison Service and Ballymun Job Centre.

In line with the Programme for Government commitment to extend the pilot schemes of the Joint Agency Response to Crime to more areas to target prolific repeat and vulnerable offenders aged 16 -21, Justice Plan 2021 contains a commitment to identify areas in which to expand the JARC project.

Key steps in this process include the recent establishment of a new oversight and governance structure for multi-agency offender management initiatives including SORAM, JARC, Domestic Violence & Complex High Risk Prisoners and Life Sentence Prisoners.

The Deputy will wish to note that while these new structures bed down, work is also ongoing on a formal independent evaluation of a number of the JARC initiatives.

Any decisions to expand JARC will be made in the context of the outcome of this evaluation process and will form part of the ongoing agenda for the new oversight mechanism.

### **Domestic Violence**



224. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Justice if she will consider an alternative to the default decision to remove the victim from the home when resolving domestic violence situations; and if she will review the situation to allow for a choice-led model whereby the victim can choose whether to remain in the home and have the perpetrator relocated or be relocated themselves. [32374/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegard Naughton):** As the Deputy may be aware, the Domestic Violence Act 2018 is the relevant legislation in Ireland, underpinning what the courts consider when deciding on an application for a domestic violence order.

I am not aware that there is any default position set out in the legislation that the victim has to leave the home when resolving domestic violence situations. The following information sets out the legal position in this area.

Section 7 of the Domestic Violence Act 2018 provides for the making of barring orders. The court may make a barring order to direct a respondent to either leave a place or to prevent them from entering a place where the applicant for the order or a dependant resides. Barring orders can remain in place for three years (or for a shorter period if the court so specifies). Before the expiration of that period another barring order can be made for a further period of up to three years.

Section 8 of the Act provides for the making of interim barring orders where there are reasonable grounds to believe that there is an immediate risk of significant harm to the applicant or a dependant, and the making of a protection order would not be sufficient to protect them. An application for an interim barring order is made during the period after an application for a barring order has been made and before the application for the barring order has been determined. The court can make an interim barring order to direct a respondent to either leave a place or to prevent them from entering a place where the applicant or a dependant resides. An interim barring order may be made ex parte, in which case it shall have effect for a period not exceeding eight working days. An interim barring order shall cease to have effect once the application for a barring order has been determined.

Section 9 of the Act provides for the making of emergency barring orders where there are reasonable grounds to believe that there is an immediate risk of significant harm to the applicant or a dependant. A person may apply for an emergency barring order where that person has lived in an intimate and committed relationship with the respondent without being their spouse or civil partner or where that person is the parent of an adult respondent. The applicant may apply for an emergency barring order if they have no legal or beneficial interest in the place or an interest which is less than the legal and beneficial interest of the respondent. The court can make an emergency barring order to direct a respondent to either leave a place or to prevent them from entering a place where the applicant or a dependant resides. An emergency barring order may be made ex parte and shall have effect for a period not exceeding eight working days.

I must emphasise that it is for the court, which is independent in the exercising of its functions, to decide in each case if the barring order should be granted.

I would also like to highlight that our laws in supporting victims of domestic and sexual crimes have been significantly strengthened in recent years, including by the introduction of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017, the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017 and the Domestic Violence Act 2018. I can assure the Deputy that my Department is continually examining our laws in this area in the context of their effectiveness and to identify if any changes are required.

*Question No. 225 answered with Question No. 215.*

### **Legal Services Regulation**

226. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Justice if she met with representatives of barristers contracted by the State in criminal law cases over the fees paid to their members; if these fees remain the same as were paid in 2002 given that cuts introduced by the State as a result of FEMPI have not been reversed in relation to barristers but have been reversed in relation to fees paid to State solicitors; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32473/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** My Department is responsible for the payment of legal fees to defence counsel under the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme while barristers instructed by the State to prosecute in criminal cases are paid by the Director of Public Prosecutions.

The Deputy will appreciate that the Director of Public Prosecutions is independent in the performance of her functions and does not come within the remit of my Department.

As I outlined in my reply to Question No. 521 of 1 June 2021, responsibility for unwinding professional fee cuts imposed between 2008 and 2011 rests with my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. However, my Department has engaged with all relevant stakeholders, including the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, with a view to having this issue resolved as it also impacts on defence counsel. My predecessor Minister Helen McEntee also met with the Bar Council on 23 September 2020.

It is my understanding that the matter is under consideration by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and will be examined further in the context of wider public pay policy and the implications for public expenditure.

### **Visa Agreements**

227. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice if she will reverse the new visa requirements on passport holders from a number of countries which came into effect at midnight on 27 January 2021 which were originally introduced to last until 5 March 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32493/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne):** I can confirm that the entry and transit visa restrictions which were brought into effect on 28 January 2021, as a necessary interim measure to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and protect public health have been lifted with effect from today, 16 June 2021.

This move is in line with the Government's Resilience and Recovery Plan for Living with COVID-19 and will be welcome news for people from South Africa, Brazil and other South American countries who need to travel to Ireland for essential reasons.

The general policy against non-essential travel and all travellers arriving into Ireland continues and travellers must comply fully with the public health measures required by law. These include completing a COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form, pre-arrival PCR test and quarantine in a designated facility or at home.

The lifting of the visa restrictions follows the resumption of the processing of all long-stay visa applications.

## Coroners Service

228. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice if she will conduct a consultation involving bereaved families, advocacy groups and campaign organisations with the intention of establishing a charter for the bereaved which will provide a clear overview of the statutory role and obligations of An Garda Síochána and other State agencies in servicing inquests, distinguishing between lawful obligations and discretionary practices and commit Government and its agencies to a statement of rights of the bereaved regarding information, viewing the body, identification, post-mortems, return of the body, return of personal effects, access to the location of death, crisis support; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32496/21]

229. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice her views on rationalising the 39 coroner districts to create a region-based, distinct agency reflecting population distribution, demography and case numbers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32497/21]

230. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice if she will increase significantly the funding necessary to meet the requirements of an independent, professional Coroner Service in its routine work and in conducting thorough investigations into deaths in contested circumstances; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32498/21]

231. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice the progress made to meet the recommendations of the review of the Coroner Service: Report of the Working Group relating to 3.4.1 organisation and 3.4.6 a new coroner agency; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32499/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 228, 229, 230 and 231 together.

The obligations on a coroner in their investigation into a reportable death are set down in the Coroners Act 1962, as subsequently amended. The coroner is an independent quasi-judicial office holder whose core function is to investigate sudden and unexplained deaths so that a death certificate can be issued. This is an important public service to the living and in particular to the next-of-kin and friends of the deceased. Coroners not only provide closure for those bereaved, but also perform a wider public service by identifying matters of public health and safety concerns.

The role of An Garda Síochána in assisting the coroner and in the carrying out of certain functions is set down in the coroner legislation. However, their obligations to investigate serious crimes, including where a death has occurred, is set down in the criminal law and is not a matter for the coroner. Access to an active crime scene must be strictly controlled where necessary for the investigation of the crime, as must access to any personal items or other materials that are relevant to the investigation. The conduct of any investigation is an operational matter for the Garda Commissioner, and as Minister I have no direct role in such matters.

A Code of Practice for Families at Inquest as provided for under section 31 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014 is in final preparation. The Code has been agreed between IHREC, the Coroners Society of Ireland and my Department and will provide an extensive information resource and guidance for families. The Code will be put on a statutory basis by an Order to be made by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

The Deputy refers to the Review of the Coroner Service published in December 2000, which was a significant milestone in the process of modernising our death investigation service, strengthening coroners' powers and to provide for a major administrative restructuring of the

coroner system.

There are currently 39 Coronial Districts in Ireland, 38 of which are funded by the relevant local authority. My Department has taken on full responsibility for the Dublin Coroner Office from the Dublin local authorities since 1 January 2018. We have greatly increased the resources available to that Office, which is the busiest in the State and operates on a full time basis. The related Dublin District mortuary and post-mortem examination facilities for the Dublin Coroner, which are also available to the Office of State Pathologist have also been modernised and extra resources provided.

The majority of the recommendations of the 2000 Review related to the strengthening of the legal provisions relating to the work of the coroner and have been implemented, including through amendments to Coroners Act 1962 in 2005, 2011, 2013, 2019 and 2020 as follows:

- The Coroners (Amendment) Act 2005 ended the restriction on the number of medical witnesses allowed at inquest.

- The Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2011 provided for the restructuring and amalgamation of coronial districts. Coroner districts within counties have been amalgamated as the opportunities have arisen. There were 48 districts in 2000, there are 39 now and will reduce to 38 within 2021.

- The Courts and Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2013 provided for Legal Aid and Legal Advice by certification by the coroner to the Legal Aid Board in relation to inquests.

- The Coroners (Amendment) Act 2019 clarified, strengthened and modernised coroner's powers in the reporting, investigation and inquest of deaths. The scope of enquiries at inquest was expanded beyond being limited to establishing the medical cause of death, to seeking to establish, to the extent the coroner considers necessary, the circumstances in which the death occurred. The Act also broadened the coroner's powers relating to mandatory reporting and inquest into maternal deaths, deaths in custody or childcare situations and significant new powers to compel witnesses and evidence at inquest.

- The Coroners (Amendment) Act 2021 made provision for the temporary additional coronial resources to coroners in districts significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The structure and resourcing of the Coronial Service will continue to be reviewed and revised as appropriate in the context of the learning from the pandemic.

*Question No. 229 answered with Question No. 228.*

*Question No. 230 answered with Question No. 228.*

*Question No. 231 answered with Question No. 228.*

### **Electric Vehicles**

232. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Justice the number of electric or hybrid vehicles purchased by her Department in 2020 and to date in 2021, respectively, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32857/21]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department has not purchased any vehicles in 2020 or 2021. Currently my Department has two diesel vehicles, a 2007 van and a 2019 van.

The Deputy may wish to note that the policy going forward will be to replace these vehicles with electric vehicles. To this end, it is planned to replace the 2007 van with an electric vehicle within the next two years. To support this move to EVs, a number of electric charging points will be installed.

### **Agriculture Schemes**

233. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the way in which the €3 million allocated in Budget 2020 for pilot new agri-environmental schemes was utilised; if it was carried over into the 2021 financial year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32379/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** As part of the budget announcement in October 2019, the then Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine announced an allocation of €3 million to fund additional pilot projects aimed specifically at climate measures in agriculture. These pilot projects are intended to focus on increasing carbon sequestration and contributing to meeting our commitments as part of the Government Climate Action Plan. They will also enhance the protection of bio-diversity and water quality and provide a template for action in advance of Ireland's next Common Agriculture Policy.

An open call for a new pilot European Innovation Partnership (EIP) scheme on reduced management of farmed peat-land was announced in August 2020 and closed for applications in October 2020. The Department received four proposals under the Call, of which two were approved for funding.

As these two pilot projects did not begin operating until 2021, there was no expenditure in relation to them in 2020. Almost €300,000 has been paid to date in respect of these projects.

### **Fishing Industry**

234. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the breakdown by port of the location of the fishers currently employed under the atypical scheme as can be discerned from their contracts of employment copies of which reside with his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32148/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Scheme for the employment of non-EEA fishers in parts of the Irish commercial sea-fishing fleet was launched on 15th February 2016. The Scheme is an extension of the Atypical Working Scheme, administered by the Department of Justice and Equality (Immigration Delivery Service).

The Department's role in this scheme is limited to hosting the Central Depository, which facilitates applications for Pre-Approvals to the Scheme, and chairing the Oversight Committee established to monitor the Scheme and ensure that it is operating as intended.

The granting of permissions to work in the State, under the Atypical Working Scheme, is a matter for decision exclusively by the Immigration Delivery Service.

The information requested is not available. It should be noted that there is no link between individual vessels and specific fishing ports.

## **Forestry Sector**

235. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of forest road grant applications have been received to date since the introduction of the forest road single consent system on 7 February 2020; the number of same that are single consent applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32163/21]

236. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the average time from receipt of an application to the issuing of an approved forest road grant licence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32164/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 235 and 236 together.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine receives applications for forestry licences and issues decisions on a daily basis.

On 7th February 2020, the Department became the sole consenting authority for forest road works licences, where a forest road entrance opens onto a public road (excluding National roads) or there is material widening of an existing entrance. Since that date, 946 forest road licence applications have been received, of which 308 are under single consent.

To date this year, the Department has issued 319 forest road licences for 134km of roads. This is 107% of the annual target of 125km of forest roads to be licensed in 2021. Forest roads are intrinsic to the haulage of timber and ensures the flow of felled timber to the sawmills. Since the beginning of the year, the average time to issue a forest road licence from date advertised is nine months.

*Question No. 236 answered with Question No. 235.*

## **Fishing Industry**

237. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider changes to the rules on the removal of capacity from individuals if they have been unable to reinstate it on the fishing register within 24 months of being deregistered considering the difficulties imposed by Covid-19 on contacting Bord Iascaigh Mhara and the Sea Fishing Boat Licensing Authority; his views on the request from fishermen that those that have lost capacity during the pandemic would have it reinstated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32180/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Under the Fisheries (Amendment) Act 2003, the functions of sea-fishing boat licensing were transferred from the Minister to the Licensing Authority for Sea-fishing Boats, which operates on an independent basis subject to criteria set out in that Act and Ministerial Policy Directives.

As Minister, I have responsibility for policy in relation to sea-fishing boat licensing under Section 3(3) of the Fisheries (Amendment) Act 2003, as amended by Section 99 of the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006. In this context, and as referred to above, Section 3 of the Act makes provision for Ministerial Policy Directives to issue to the independent Licensing Authority for Sea-fishing Boats.

I am, however, precluded from exercising any power or control in relation to individual cases, or a group of cases, with which the Licensing Authority is or may be concerned under

Section 3(5) of the 2003 Act.

Under Policy Directive 2/2003, capacity taken off the Fishing Boat Register must be re-introduced on to the Register within two years of its removal, otherwise the entitlement is lost to its owner. This element of the Policy Directive is known informally as the “Two Year Rule” and has applied to off-Register capacity since 1st April 2004.

One of the main objectives of Policy Directive 2/2003 was to provide the tools for the effective management of capacity in order to comply with fleet capacity targets set down in EU fleet policy.

I am currently examining a recommendation from the Licensing Authority to remove the “Two Year Rule”. Any proposal for a Policy Directive involves a formal procedure including a public consultation on the matter.

### **Fishing Industry**

238. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if any foreign fishing vessels landing a catch at Irish ports are being facilitated to avoid the weighting of fish at the pier requirement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32291/21]

239. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the foreign fishing vessels that have landed fish at Irish piers and have been allowed to bypass the weighting of fish at the pier requirement since the requirement was introduced; the volume and species of fish involved; the name of the pier in each case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32292/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 238 and 239 together.

Ireland has received a Commission Implementing Decision revoking the approval of the Irish control plan submitted for the weighing of fishery products in accordance with Article 61(1) of Council Regulation (EC) No 1224/2009.

It should be noted that the 2012 Control Plan, prior to its revocation, provided that the Irish authorities may have permitted fisheries products to be weighed by relevant operators after transport from the place of landing provided that they were transported to a destination on the territory of Ireland, as the Member State concerned.

I should advise the Deputy that the monitoring and control of fishing vessels within Ireland’s Exclusive Fisheries Zone are law enforcement matters for the Irish control authorities. Under the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act, 2006, all operational issues of this nature are exclusively for the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) and the Naval Service. I am expressly precluded from getting involved in operational matters such as those referred to by the Deputy.

However, in order to be of assistance to the Deputy, I have made enquiries of the SFPA and am advised that all vessels regardless of their nationality are required to weigh on landing prior to transport away from the landing site. There are two common control plans in place with other Member States; France and Belgium. These common control plans allow for fish to be transported to registered establishments prior to weighing in either France or Belgium. This applies to vessels from all Member States landing into Irish ports.

I have referred the Deputy's question requesting further operational details on this matter to the SFPA for attention and direct reply.

*Question No. 239 answered with Question No. 238.*

### **Domestic Pets**

240. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the current requirements for family pets travelling on the island of Ireland, north, south and vice versa; the details of recent guidance notes issued to the general public; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32298/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** As outlined in EU Regulation 576/2013, since 2014, dogs, cats and ferrets travelling as pets between Ireland and Northern Ireland have needed to be microchipped, to be vaccinated against rabies and to be accompanied by a pet passport. These requirements have not changed as a result of Brexit.

Since 1st January 2021, the movement of pets between Ireland and Northern Ireland has been protected under the Ireland – Northern Protocol, which forms part of the broader EU-UK Withdrawal Agreement. Under the Protocol, Northern Ireland is subject to EU Regulation 576/2013 and is still treated as if it were a Member State for the purposes of this Regulation. The Commission has issued detailed guidance on this topic, as part of their series of Brexit Readiness Notices.

The Department has also issued a guidance document for pet travel after Brexit and will continue to communicate with pet owners regarding the requirements for entering Ireland.

### **Fur Farming**

241. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will commit to his Department engaging in dialogue with a farmer (details supplied) over concerns regarding the imminent ban on their farming activity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32306/21]

242. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason his Department is proposing an immediate ban on fur farming rather than the phased-out approach committed to in the current Programme for Government; if his attention has been drawn to the dire financial consequences this will create for such farmers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32307/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 241 and 242 together.

The current Programme for Government contains a commitment to prohibit fur farming in Ireland and Department officials have been working on appropriate steps to give effect to this. A series of meetings with the fur farm operators and their representatives have been held in this regard. There has also been ongoing correspondence and dialogue between the two parties.

Draft legislation is currently being prepared by the Department and contains provisions for appropriate compensation under various income loss headings for the small number of operators affected. The Department has taken into account the views expressed by the operators and



their advisers with whom it has been engaging in recent months, in preparing the legislation. The details of the legislation, and the proposed compensation scheme will be presented before the Oireachtas in due course.

Whilst COVID-19 brought about a renewed focus on fur farming, the primary reason for its prohibition is animal welfare related. While fur farming was once legal and socially acceptable in most countries, societal understanding of animal welfare has developed significantly and there is now a broad consensus among veterinary and other scientific experts that certain animals should not be farmed solely for their fur or skin.

*Question No. 242 answered with Question No. 241.*

### **Veterinary Services**

243. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the progress made in ensuring that various animal remedies that were available up to now without a prescription from a veterinary surgeon will still be available at competitive prices after the EU regulation requiring them to be prescribed by a veterinary surgeon comes into force here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32319/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** In line with findings from a 2019 Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA) Expert Task Force Report, antiparasitic veterinary medicines no longer meet exemption criteria in EU law which permits them to be supplied without a veterinary prescription. Therefore, from 28th January 2022, antiparasitic veterinary medicines will require a veterinary prescriptions before they can be supplied.

All current suppliers of antiparasitic veterinary medicines will continue to be legally permitted to supply these medicines post-January 2022. The Department is actively working with all stakeholders to sustain a competitive market for the supply of these products. The ambition is to ensure Irish farmers are empowered to purchase medicines from their supplier of choice.

Initiatives such as the development of a National Veterinary Prescribing System (NVPS) will help deliver on this ambition. The NVPS will result in a prescription being made available to a farmer by email, text or in paper. Farmers can then engage with Licensed Merchants, veterinary pharmacists or their veterinary practitioner in getting their prescription dispensed.

### **Agriculture Schemes**

244. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount of funding from the carbon tax fund that was allocated to the new pilot environmental scheme REAP; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32380/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I secured an additional €79 million, including €23 million carbon tax, in Budget 2021 to support action in the area of biodiversity, climate, environment and health and safety, all the while supporting farm incomes.

It is my intention to fund each of the activities listed below in 2021 which includes the scheme referred to by the Deputy. Final funding allocations, including the use of Carbon Tax funds, will be determined in consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

- Re-opening of the organic farming scheme,
- Straw Incorporation measure (SIM),
- Agri-environment training for farmers,
- REAP – Results based environment-agri pilot projects,
- Soil sampling,
- Farm Environmental Study,
- TAMS environment,
- Rewetting EIP,
- Continuous Professional Development for advisors,
- Health and safety initiatives under EIP-AGRI,
- Biodiversity actions for farmers and communities and
- Peatland rejuvenation.

The Results-based Environmental-Agri Pilot (REAP) is an innovative, ambitious and farmer-friendly pilot that will deliver an important income boost to participating farmers. While the project will support our environmental objectives, it will also support farm incomes by providing a maximum payment of €12,600 to participating farms over the term of their REAP contract. It is a targeted measure for farmers not currently participating in other agri-environment schemes.

### **Electric Vehicles**

245. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of electric or hybrid vehicles purchased by his Department in 2020 and to date in 2021, respectively in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32837/21]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I wish to advise the Deputy that the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine owns a range of vehicles, including specialised agriculture vehicles for which there are no alternative electric or hybrid equivalents available.

The Department did not purchase any electric or hybrid vehicles during the period in question.

### **Departmental Expenditure**

246. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the estimated cost of developing the 400 remote working hubs and the requisite support services identified in Our Rural Future and for additional remote working hubs in each of the 31 local authority areas. [32288/21]

**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 op-

portunity 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. This is a key focus of the Government's new rural development policy *Our Rural Future*.

Remote working, supported by appropriate infrastructure and facilities, has the potential to encourage more people to live in rural areas while working in good quality jobs, no matter where their employer is based. It can also help revitalise our rural town if remote working hubs are developed in their centres.

The National Hub Network expanded from a €1m scheme that was funded under the 2019 Dormant Accounts Fund Action Plan. This project was originally scoped to develop a hub network, supported by a shared online platform for remote working facilities in the Atlantic Economic Corridor. However, in light of the clear demand for such a network across the county, this was expanded to a national project that would support both *Our Rural Future* and the National Remote Working strategy.

To support this expansion I have provided the Western Development Commission with additional funding to support the project, with €250k being provided to develop connectedhubs.ie as a national brand, which I launched on May 31 in Swinford, Co. Mayo. This money will also fund a national awareness raising campaign for the hub network.

In addition, I have committed to funding the on-boarding and operational costs of the connectedhubs.ie platform for hubs across the country for the next 3 years. This is expected to cost in the region of €1.3m.

The National Hub Network, supported by connectedhubs.ie will work to increase the impact and benefit of our remote working infrastructure across the country. This will help to guide future funding decisions and to increase the return-on-investment to the exchequer going forward.

My Department also continues to invest significantly in the development of new Hub facilities across the country. Since 2015, the Town and Village Renewal Scheme has provided €7.8m in funding to hubs and hub-related projects. Many of the successful projects involve the regeneration of historic town centre buildings as Enterprise and Co-Working Hubs.

I recently announced funding of €15 million that is available under the 2021 Town & Village Renewal Scheme (TVRS). In line with *Our Rural Future*, a key focus of this year's scheme is to renovate derelict and vacant buildings in our town centres, and specifically supports bringing vacant properties in town centres back into use or re-purpose existing community or publicly owned buildings as remote working hubs.

I have increased the maximum grant available under this Scheme to €500,000 to permit projects of significant scale to be funded. The TVRS It is administered by Local Authorities, who are currently seeking expressions of interest for suitable projects from local groups in towns and villages within their respective counties. The closing date set for receipt of completed applications by my Department is 16 July.

In addition to funding through the Town and Village Scheme, €65m has also been invested in hub projects through the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund since 2018. A further call for projects under the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund will issue later this year.

### **Local Authorities**

247. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development

the estimated cost of reviewing the local authority participation structures; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32289/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** A Public Participation Network (PPN) is a structure that brings together volunteer-led groups in each local authority area to represent the Community and Voluntary, Environment, and Social Inclusion sectors on Local Authority policymaking structures. PPNs were established following the enactment of the Local Government Reform Act 2014.

My Department has engaged Mazars consultants to carry out an independent review of PPN structures, which is currently underway after a competitive procurement process. The final cost of the review will be published, as appropriate, when the process is completed. The review will consider whether the current structures in place are supporting PPNs in meeting their objectives. Its aim is to ensure that PPNs continue to be fit for purpose and to make recommendations that will support their ongoing development.

Such a review is regarded by my Department as timely given the length of time since PPNs were established. The Programme for Government includes a commitment to “carry out a comprehensive review of PPNs and LECs to ensure they are fit for purpose for climate action and community development”. The final review report is expected to be complete by end 2021.

### **Community Development Projects**

248. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if there will be another call for funding for community centres under the community enhancement programme in 2021. [32181/21]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** The Community Enhancement Programme (CEP) was first launched by my Department in 2018. The Programme provides funding to community groups and organisations across Ireland, with a focus on areas of disadvantage. Funding is provided to each Local Authority area, and the programme is administered by the Local Community Development Committees (LCDC) on the basis of local need.

Between 2018 and the end of 2020 the CEP funded over 8,000 projects across the country.

I launched the 2021 CEP on the 10th May with an allocation of €4.5m. The key theme of this year's programme is supporting groups as they re-open facilities which were closed due to COVID-19. In order to allow flexibility, each LCDC can set their own closing date to best suit its area, but all closing dates must be no later than 16th July 2021. Groups should check with their LCDC for further details.

There are no plans at present for another call for funding that is specifically for community centres under the CEP in 2021. However, groups involved with community centres, like all other community groups, can apply for funding under the CEP that was recently launched.