

Written Answers.

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

Questions Nos. 1 to 9, inclusive, answered orally.

Departmental Bodies

10. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Transport the status of and position regarding the filling of the vacancies on the Taxi Advisory Committee. [32456/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I would like to thank the Deputy for the opportunity to clarify the role of the Advisory Committee on Small Public Service Vehicles (SPSVs), sometimes known as the Taxi Advisory Committee.

The Committee was established under the Taxi Regulation Act 2013 to provide both the Minister and the NTA with advice in relation to small public service vehicles and their drivers. Neither the NTA nor the Minister are bound by any advice provided. To ensure that the Committee can provide an informed view on relevant policy and regulatory matters, its composition is prescribed by legislation to ensure that it represents a broad range of interests and, insofar as is practicable, ensures an equitable gender balance between men and women, and equitable representation from both urban and rural areas. There is currently one vacancy on the Committee.

Drivers are an important part of the Committee's membership and four positions on the Committee are reserved for members who can represent driver interests. All four of these positions are filled by licenced SPSV drivers from across the country and I am satisfied that this ensures the Committee's advice is informed by the perspective of drivers. The Committee also features dispatch operators, passenger representatives, including members representing the interests of disabled passengers and older passengers, members from the tourist industry, local government and from An Garda Síochána. I am of the view that one of the strengths of the Committee is this broad and diverse representation and I regard the perspective of passengers to be of particular importance when considering SPSV policy issues.

Members of the Committee are appointed by the Minister. Although the legislation prescribes the composition of the Advisory Committee, it does not provide for a specific method for filling vacancies on the Committee and, accordingly, the approach taken over the years has varied. The unpaid nature of positions on the Committee has, at times, posed a challenge in recruiting suitable candidates through open competition. Most of the current membership was appointed following an open competition run by the Public Appointments Service in June 2019, however, this competition failed to attract enough suitable candidates and two vacancies remained unfilled for a period. Three further vacancies arose since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 has had a profound effect on the SPSV sector and I was keen to ensure that drivers were represented on the Committee during this difficult time. In view of difficulties encoun-

tered in the previous PAS competition in filling all of the vacancies, and given the additional challenges associated with running a formal competition in the present climate, the NTA was asked to engage with taxi representative groups to identify suitable candidates with due regard to gender balance and the need to balance urban and rural representation.

As some representative groups were reluctant to join the Committee, I decided to leave one vacancy on the Committee for the time being. I respect the prerogative of those representative groups not to be part of the Committee. Nevertheless, I hope that they reconsider their position in time. Although I will meet these representative groups from time to time on identified issues, the Advisory Committee will continue to be the focus of my engagement with the SPSV sector during this pandemic.

Aviation Industry

11. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Transport if he will intervene and engage with a company (details supplied) to ensure that no worker at Cork Airport will be laid off for ten weeks at the end of 2021. [31850/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The temporary closure of Aer Lingus's crew base at Cork Airport aligns with the airports planned closure to carry out construction works on its main runway and associated infrastructure. In addition to the announced lay offs for the period, the airline also reported that they will be seeking a number of redundancies. The airline has indicated that such immediate actions and wider structural changes are to address the impact that COVID-19 has had on its operations.

Both Minister Naughton and I met with their CEO soon after their announcement, and they did confirm that there is no strategic intent to reduce connectivity at Cork Airport, but that the restoration of air services would depend on market conditions. It is clear from my ongoing discussions with Aer Lingus and other aviation stakeholders, that the priority for the industry is clarity around the re-opening of international travel.

On 28 May, the Government set out its plan for the resumption of non-essential international air travel, scheduled to begin on 19 July. This plan is built around EU Digital COVID Certificates and other proofs of vaccination, pre-departure PCR testing and mandatory quarantine that will allow international travel to operate safely. An "emergency brake" mechanism will also allow us to respond to the potential emergence of variants of concern.

On 1 June, Government launched its Economic Recovery Plan 2021 with the goal of achieving rapid job creation and economic growth after the pandemic. This plan sets out new measures for businesses and affected sectors as the economy reopens, and details for existing emergency pandemic financial supports including the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), giving certainty to employers, workers, and for those who need it most.

While it may take some time for our aviation sector to regain the strong economic position it had at the start of the pandemic, Government has committed to ensuring that there will be no "cliff-edge" to the COVID-19 related business supports that are currently available, and relevant Departments continue to work on the necessary implementation measures to ensure a safe re-opening of international travel next month.

Questions Nos. 12 and 13 answered orally.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

14. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Transport the financial supports he will put in place to ensure the recovery of Cork Airport. [31851/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I would like to thank the Deputy for his question on Cork Airport.

As the Deputy will be aware, in recognition of the significant challenges being faced by airports, particularly airports like Cork, the Government established a new Covid19 Regional State Airports Programme earlier this year. This Programme, with an available budget of €32.1m, is providing both capital and operational supports to Cork Airport in 2021.

An application for funding in respect of a significant runway overlay project at Cork Airport is currently being assessed by my Department. Pending a satisfactory evaluation, I expect this project will be approved for funding in the coming weeks - with an allocation of approximately €10 million.

In addition to the capital funding, Cork Airport will also be invited to apply for operational supports, under this Programme, later in the year.

Furthermore, on 24 February 2021, my Department secured European Commission approval for a €26 million funding scheme for Irish Airports. As part of this scheme, a €20m damages measure has been established to support State airports, including Cork. My Department is currently assessing applications for funding under this measure and aid will be disbursed shortly.

These direct supports are in addition to the broad range of supports put in place by Government to help mitigate the effects of the crisis. Cork airport is also availing of the horizontal supports provided by Government including the wage subsidy scheme and commercial rates waiver.

The Government is fully committed to supporting the aviation sector, and we recognise the importance of providing clarity on the extent and duration of supports beyond 2021. In this context, Government will consider what further supports may be needed to help all regional airports, including Cork and Shannon, as part of the upcoming Estimates process.

Road Network

15. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Transport the way a determination will be made regarding the development of the series of small bypasses he has spoken of in recent times; his views on the level of priority that will be given to the section of the N24 around Tipperary town in this regard; his plans to continue to engage with the population of Tipperary town on the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32430/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Background

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. TII ultimately delivers the National Roads Programme in line with Project Ireland 2040, the National Planning

Framework (NPF) and the NDP.

Within the overall context of Project Ireland 2040, the NDP was developed to underpin the successful implementation of the NPF. This provides the strategic and financial framework for the National Roads Programme for the period 2018 - 2027.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to bring forward the review of the NDP and use the review to set out an updated Plan for the period out to 2030. The review of the NDP will be aligned with the NPF and Project Ireland 2040. Accordingly, work is underway within my Department, in conjunction with TII, to contribute to this review.

Developing a series of Bypasses

A comprehensive analysis of the status of all national road projects listed in the current NDP, and new ones proposed by TII to 2030, will be carried out to consider whether changes could feasibly be made to alter the project scope/delivery and projected cost. The strategic transport issues, including those for national roads, are being considered in the context of the ongoing review of the NDP.

As part of this review, I am focused on prioritising the relief of traffic congestion within towns, facilitating compact growth, decarbonisation and the provision of a robust secondary network of roads between 2021 and 2030. Towns such as Tipperary Town will be considered in this light.

It should be noted that all projects, including those listed in the NDP or any revision to the NDP, require statutory approval and compliance with the Public Spending Code.

N24 - Tipperary Town Bypass

The proposed N24 Cahir to Limerick Junction Improvement Scheme, which would include a bypass of Tipperary Town, is currently at early Planning and Design stage.

Tipperary County Council, in association with Limerick City and County Council, has worked to procure the services of Technical Advisors who are now appointed and in-place and working on advancing the scheme. Phase 1 activities (Concept and Feasibility) are complete and the proposed N24 scheme is currently at Phase 2 activities (Option Selection).

A Public Consultation on Constraints (obstacles or barriers) to possible routes took place in Quarter 1 2021 informing the Options Selection stage, with the shortlisted transport corridors expected to be unveiled in June 2021. Tipperary County Council has advised TII that the scheme will be going to public consultation on 25th June for a six-week period ending on 6th August 2021.

Ship Disposal

16. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to offers made for the removal and scrapping of the MV Alta wreck in Ballycotton, County Cork; if so, if these offers have been considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26930/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I wish to thank Deputy Buckley for raising this matter.

As the Deputy may be aware, the relevant legislation that allows for the removal of aban-

doned vessels in Irish waters such as that referred to by the Deputy is the Merchant Shipping (Salvage and Wreck) Act 1993. This Act gives effect to the 1989 International Convention on Salvage of which Ireland is a signatory state and sets out the roles and responsibilities of a number of bodies.

Section 40 of the Act provides that the Minister for Transport has the “general superintendence” of matters relating to wrecked or stranded vessels. The Act also sets out the responsibilities from an operational perspective for other bodies.

Sections 51 and 52 are of particular note with regard to the duty of the owner and appropriate authorities.

Section 51 places the initial responsibility for removing a wreck on the owner of the vessel. However, if the appropriate authority, in this case Cork County Council, considers the wreck is or is likely to become an obstruction or danger to navigation or a threat of harm to the marine environment, it shall proceed to raise and remove the wreck or otherwise render it harmless.

While the Act does allow for the removal of a wreck, it does not contain provisions in relation to the costs associated with the removal of a wreck where the sale of that wreck is not possible, and the owners of the vessel cannot be located. It is understood that no evidence of ownership or insurance has come to light yet in the case referred to by the Deputy.

As the appropriate authority under the Act, Cork County Council has taken the lead in dealing with the case in question and has taken a number of steps to date in their duties under the Act.

I understand that my Department received two initial queries from interested parties regarding the removal of the wreck and the parties were advised that they may wish to contact the appropriate authority, in this instance Cork County Council, to discuss the issue.

Officials from my Department have met with Cork County Council to discuss the matter and will continue to be available to support relevant authorities in the exercise of their functions as set out in the legislation in question.

Question No. 17 answered with Question No. 9.

Public Transport

18. **Deputy Darren O’Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the significant discrepancy in the reported funding level of the CIÉ 1951 scheme; if his attention has further been drawn to the fact that it was reported on 28 May 2021 that the scheme was 93.8% funded at 1 May 2021 and six days later on 3 June 2021, it was reported that the scheme was 92.3% at the end of April 2021 (details supplied); if he will ensure the accurate figures are reported; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32461/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport in Ireland.

The CIÉ Group has two pension schemes, namely the Regular Wages Scheme (“RWS”) which covers frontline staff such as bus and train drivers across the three CIÉ companies; and the 1951 superannuation scheme (“1951 Scheme”) which mainly covers administrative staff. Issues in relation to CIÉ pension schemes are primarily a matter for the trustees of the schemes, the CIÉ Group and their employees.

In relation to the RWS, CIÉ has prepared and submitted draft Statutory Instruments (SIs) to give effect to the proposed changes to the scheme, and these drafts are now being considered by my Department in conjunction with NewERA.

Concerning the 1951 pension scheme, it is my understanding that this scheme does not currently meet the Minimum Funding Standard (MFS) as required by the Pensions Authority. The MFS is the method the Pensions Authority use to measure whether a scheme has enough assets to cover its obligations with a margin for risk to allow for adverse future experience relating to the scheme's assets and/or liabilities.

Members of the scheme were recently balloted regarding a Labour Court Recommendation which emerged on 23rd November 2020 and seeks to address the MFS deficit, with a majority of the members voting to accept the proposals.

In relation to the Deputy's question on the reported level of funding of the 1951 scheme, I have been advised by CIÉ that the previously reported figure of 92.3% was released in error. This figure was an estimate which was derived from a high level investment monitoring model and has since been determined to be incorrect. CIÉ have confirmed that the figure of 93.8% for 01/05/2021 is correct.

I further wish to advise that CIÉ wrote to me on the 26th of May advising that they intend to commence the process of amending the Statutory Instruments to implement the Labour Court Recommendation in relation to the 1951 scheme. I also understand that CIÉ has advised the Pensions Authority and the '1951' Pension Scheme Trustees and Committee of this development.

Question No. 19 answered orally.

Airport Policy

20. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Transport if he will provide multi-year CAPEX funding to enable Shannon Airport to navigate its way out of the current crisis; if he will also provide a fixed euro amount per passenger to subsidise airport charges for airlines as this type of funding is needed to grow traffic; if it will be ensured that provision is made to establish a regional route marketing fund administered by Tourism Ireland on a multi-annual basis for Shannon Airport, as the restoration of Ireland's air services is essential to connect the mid-west and western regions of Ireland to global markets which drive the industrial, tourism and international service sectors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31116/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I would like to thank the Deputy for this question.

The Deputy will be aware that one of the Recommendations of the Aviation Taskforce was that a stimulus package should be put in place for each of Shannon, Cork, Ireland West, Kerry and Donegal airports to encourage the rebuilding of traffic. As part of this package, the Taskforce recommended that the State should directly provide the airports with a common fixed sum per passenger which will be used by the airports to stimulate traffic by reducing airport charges for airlines and restoring and growing passenger numbers to the regions.

In response to this and other recommendations of the Taskforce, Government put in place an €80m aviation support package which was announced on 10 November. This package includes €32.1 million for a new COVID-19 Regional State Airports Programme for Shannon (and Cork) Airports. Under this Programme, Shannon Airport will have access to capital and

operational supports in 2021. In relation to multi-annual CAPEX supports, the Government provided Shannon Airport with €6.1m in emergency capital funding last year and a further €6.3 million in 2021 under the COVID-19 Regional State Airports Programme to date this year.

Following consultation with the EU Commission, a State aid approved Irish aid Scheme worth €26 million to compensate airport operators for the losses caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was also established. These schemes include compensation for State airports (Dublin, Cork and Shannon) of approximately €20 million, in light of COVID-19 impacts in 2020. This funding will provide State airports, including Shannon Airport, with the flexibility to roll out route incentives/charge rebates, in consultation with airlines, with a view to supporting recovery and growth of connectivity. The Department is currently assessing applications for this funding and would hope to be in a position to disburse this compensation in the coming weeks. In order to ensure parity of treatment, funding will be allocated to airports proportionate to the damage caused. In this regard, funding will be allocated proportionately in line with 2019 passenger numbers at the airports.

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, the Government has made significant funding available to the Irish aviation industry, including Shannon Airport, through a range of business supports. The bulk of the support available is through the TWSS/EWSS wage subsidy schemes which were specifically designed to maintain the link between employers and employees. It is estimated that by end-June 2021, the sector will have received approximately €300 million in such supports.

The Economic Recovery Plan published by Government on 1 June, recognises that additional support may be required to support the aviation sector's recovery as it opens up.

Finally, any fund administered by Tourism Ireland would be under the remit of the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

21. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Transport the number of electric cars that have been sold in Ireland in each of the past three years and to date in 2021; and if a target has been set on the number of electric cars to be sold here by the end of 2021 and over the course of the next three years. [29377/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Providing a sustainable, low-carbon transport system is a key priority of my Department. The Programme for Government commits to 7% average annual emissions reduction to 2030; ultimately, the goal is for a zero-emission mobility system by 2050. The transport sector, which accounts for about 20% of Ireland's overall carbon emissions, must play a central role in the national decarbonisation effort. 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.

Electric vehicles (EVs) are the most prominent transport mitigation measure in the 2019 *Climate Action Plan*, and Ireland has set an ambitious target of 936,000 EVs on our roads by 2030. This target is challenging but indicates the scale of the transformation that is needed across all sectors if Ireland is to achieve its climate targets in the coming years. The Government, supported by the work of the *Low Emission Vehicle Taskforce*, has worked to ensure that conditions and policies are in place to support citizens in making greener vehicle choices. A comprehensive suite of measures is available to EV drivers, including purchase grants for private car owners and taxi drivers, VRT relief, reduced tolls, home charger grants, favourable motor and BIK tax rates, as well as a comprehensive charging network. These measures have

collectively contributed to increased take up of EVs in Ireland in recent years, albeit from a low base.

The number of electric cars registered per year is set out in the following table.

Type	2018	2019	2020	2021 (to end May)
Battery Electric	1233	3444	4013	3946
Petrol PHEV	729	1343	2459	3792
Diesel PHEV	10	3	33	97
Total	1972	4790	6505	7835

My Department has convened the *Electric Vehicle Policy Pathway (EVPP) Working Group* to produce a roadmap to achieving the 2030 EV target. The *EVPP Working Group* comprises senior officials and has considered regulatory, financial, and taxation policies to help drive a significant ramp-up in passenger EVs and electric van sales. The recommendations of the EVPP Working Group are being considered at senior level and will be brought to Government shortly.

Road Projects

22. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Transport the way in which capital projects such as the N26 can help to enhance regional accessibility in the west of Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32449/21]

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. TII ultimately delivers the National Roads Programme in line with Project Ireland 2040, the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the NDP.

In that context, TII provides my Department with regular updates on its delivery of the National Roads Programme. The following information is the most up to-date information available to me on TII's delivery of projects on the N26.

Background

Within the overall context of Project Ireland 2040, the NDP was developed to underpin the successful implementation of the NPF. This provides the strategic and financial framework for the National Roads Programme for the period from 2018 to 2027. The focus of TII's activities is, accordingly, being directed towards the development of the major national road improvement schemes that are included in the NDP, along with the maintenance of the existing national road network.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to bring forward the review of the NDP from 2022 and to use the review to set out an updated NDP for the period out to 2030. The review of the NDP will be aligned with the NPF and Project Ireland 2040. Work is underway within my Department to contribute to this review.

I would also like to take this opportunity to highlight that all projects, including those listed in the NDP or any revision to the NDP, require statutory approval and compliance with the

Public Spending Code.

Enhanced Regional Accessibility under the NDP

A core priority under the NPF is the essential requirement to enhance and upgrade accessibility between urban centres of population and their regions, in parallel with the initiation of compact growth of urban centres. This has a crucial role to play in maximising the growth potential of the regional urban centres and the economy as a whole. Substantial progress has been made since the year 2000 in improving the road linkages between Dublin and most of the other urban areas and regions. Under the NDP, the objective is to complete those linkages so that every region and all the major urban areas, particularly those in the North-West, are linked to Dublin by a high-quality road network.

In 2020, there was significant progress in developing new transport links through the appraisal, planning and procurement stages. As set out in Project Ireland 2040, improving access to the north-west is a strategic aim to support balanced national development. The N4 Collooney to Castlebaldwin project in Sligo received Government approval on 29 January 2019, with construction ongoing and expected to be complete in late 2021. The N5 Westport to Turlough project in Mayo received Government approval on 15 October 2019 and construction is ongoing. The N5 Ballaghaderreen to Scramoge project received Government approval on 9 June 2021 and is due to commence construction later this summer.

N26 Road Projects

While there are currently no specific projects on the N26 included in the NDP, there is a general commitment for targeted improvements to address bottlenecks and enhance safety on this route. The following are a number of projects that are ongoing on the route to achieve these targeted improvements.

The construction contract for the Cloongullane Bridge Scheme was awarded in October 2020, and TII provided an allocation of €2.5 million in 2020 and a further allocation of €7 million in 2021 to Mayo County Council to progress this project through construction.

An allocation of €50,000 was provided to the Council in 2020 for the preparation of a Strategic Assessment Report (SAR) for the proposed link road between the N26 and N59. The SAR was approved by my Department in March 2021 and TII have provided an allocation of €100,000 in 2021 to progress this minor safety scheme through the early planning and design phases.

Rail Network

23. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the provision of a new DART service to Hazelhatch and Celbridge on the Kildare line as part of the DART plus programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32204/21]

24. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Transport if he has examined the possibility of extending the DART+ south west project as far as Sallins; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32451/21]

62. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the plans to extend the DART northwards to Balbriggan. [32248/21]

92. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the proposed exten-

sion of the DART to Lucan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31712/21]

217. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which he remains satisfied that the currently proposed extension of DART facilities to north County Kildare sufficiently addresses the needs of the towns such as Naas, Sallins, Celbridge, Hazelhatch as well as Kilcock, Maynooth, Leixlip and Confey having regard to the various concerns expressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32757/21]

218. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport when work on the upgrading and the electrification of the Maynooth rail line is likely to commence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32758/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 23, 24, 62, 92, 217 and 218 together.

As the Deputies are aware, as Minister for Transport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure in the Greater Dublin Area, including planning and implementation of the DART+ Programme.

The DART+ Programme is a cornerstone programme of projects for the development of rail in the Greater Dublin Area which comprises of DART fleet, as well as the DART+ Coastal (North), DART+ Coastal (south), DART+ West and DART+ South-West projects. The NTA in consultation with Iarnród Éireann is progressing the various projects which are at varying stages of planning and development.

I can confirm that my Department has received a Preliminary Business Case for the overall programme and that Preliminary Business Case is under review as required by the Public Spending Code. Following the required reviews, the Preliminary Business Case will be brought to Government for its approval as required under Decision Gate 1 under the Public Spending Code and, if approved, that will permit the purchase of additional DART fleet and will also permit the DART+ West project enter the statutory planning process, subject to the completion of the necessary planning and environmental documentation.

Noting the NTA's responsibility in the matter, I have referred the Deputy's questions to the NTA for a more detailed reply in relation to specific issues raised. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

Road Network

25. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to make cycling and walking safer on existing rural roads; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32411/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy may be aware, the Programme for Government has committed to Exchequer spending of approximately €360 million per annum on walking and cycling over the lifetime of the Government, equivalent to 20% of the 2020 transport capital budget. This investment will help support the planned delivery of almost 1,000 kilometres of improved walking and cycling infrastructure by 2025 as well as additional investment in Greenways.

The year 2021 has therefore seen a significant increase in my Department's funding for cycling and walking, in line with the Government's prioritisation of Active Travel and Greenways. As well as an increased allocation of €240 million administered through the National

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Transport Authority (NTA) to Active Travel projects in Dublin, the Greater Dublin Area and the four regional cities and over €50 million to the Department's Greenways programme, I was delighted to announce earlier this year an additional €72.8 million to projects in the 19 remaining local authorities.

This funding stream constitutes the first ever major Active Travel investment programme for rural Ireland, and amounts to more than the entire Active Travel budget for 2019. A full list of programmes being funded can be found on the NTA website. The overall increase in funding across urban and rural Ireland will not only support the construction and improvement of safe and connected walking and cycling infrastructure but also the deployment of almost 250 dedicated Active Travel staff in local authorities around the country.

In addition to the increased funding for walking and cycling infrastructure, a number of smaller-scale initiatives are being progressed by my Department to support and promote efforts to increase safe Active Travel across the country. The Department of Transport funds the delivery of CycleRight training through Cycling Ireland, which delivers cycling training to schoolchildren around the country and equips them with the skills to cycle safely.

In partnership with the Department of Education we also launched the Safe Routes to Schools Programme earlier this year, which aims to accelerate the delivery of safe walking, scooting and cycling infrastructure on key access routes to schools. It has had a great response, with applications received from schools in every county in Ireland, and I expect to be in a position to announce the first round of funding under this programme before the end of this month.

The step-change in funding committed in Budget 2021 and the introduction of various innovative measures to encourage safe and connected Active Travel is proof of the Government's commitment to this area, and I look forward to the delivery of the numerous projects and programmes around the country, including in rural areas.

Public Transport

26. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport the progress made in making the LocalLink service more accessible to persons with disabilities, including expanding the geographical and temporal span of services and ensuring all services are fully wheelchair-accessible. [32408/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport.

It is the National Transport Authority (NTA) which has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally. The NTA also has national responsibility for integrated local and rural transport, including management of the Rural Transport Programme which operates under the Local Link brand.

In light of the NTA's responsibilities in this matter, I have referred your question to the NTA for direct reply to you. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Departmental Schemes

27. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport if he will consider piloting a free public transport scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31502/21]

90. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Transport if there will be any free public transport days over summer 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31924/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 27 and 90 together.

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

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has the statutory responsibility for the regulation of fares in relation to public passenger transport services and also has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public transport services by way of public transport services contracts in respect of services that are socially necessary but commercially unviable. The funding of those services comprises both the fares paid by passengers and the subvention payments from the Exchequer. The main purpose of the subvention payment is to meet the gap between income from fares and the cost of operating services.

The provision of public transport services is heavily dependent on passenger fare revenue as it normally contributes about 65% of the operational cost. The remaining 35% of cost is covered by the PSO grant and the Department of Social Protection grant under the Free Travel Scheme. In Budget 2020, and prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, a total of €304 million was provided for PSO and Local Link rural regular services. Due to the impact of Covid-19, which resulted in the collapse of fare revenue on public transport, a further €370 million was allocated to enable the continued operation of public transport services in 2020. My primary focus is to ensure that public transport services continue to operate during this pandemic and I secured almost €659m for PSO services in 2021, of which €30m is to support the licensed bus sector.

Any assessment of a proposed change to public transport fare structures including the pilot of a free transport scheme and campaigns such as the previously ran “Kid Go Free” would be a matter for the NTA to consider in the first instance. I have therefore forwarded the Deputy’s question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Haulage Industry

28. **Deputy Darren O’Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the problems still facing many hauliers with Transport Manager CPC qualifications (details supplied); his views on whether this residency requirement undermines the Common Travel Area rights of citizens to be able to live and work freely on these islands; if he will work with his counterpart in Northern Ireland to address this and seek approval from Europe to remedy this if necessary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32458/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Regulation (EC) No 1071/2009 establishes common rules concerning the conditions to be complied with to pursue the occupation of road transport operator and provides that requisite professional competence is a key requirement to hold a road transport operator licence. Pursuant to this key requirement, Article 4 of the Regulation specifies that a Transport Manager designated by a road transport operator must:

- Effectively and continuously manage the transport activities of the undertaking;
- Have a genuine link to the licensed undertaking or otherwise be entitled under contract to carry out duties as Transport Manager on behalf of the undertaking;

- Be of good repute;
- Be resident in the Community
- Hold a Transport Manager Certificate of Professional Competence (CPC) issued by a competent authority of the EU.

As outlined by the European Commission (see the notification available at https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/brexit_files/info_site/road_transport_en.pdf), following the end of the Brexit transition period on 31 December 2020 a Transport Manager CPC issued by a competent authority in the UK, including Northern Ireland, is no longer valid in the EU. This means that a Transport Manager holding a UK-issued CPC can no longer act as Transport Manager for an EU-based road transport operator.

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

As the deadline has now passed for applying for a corresponding Irish Transport Manager CPC, any persons who wish to act as Transport Manager for an Irish/EU operator must obtain a Transport Manager CPC issued by an EU Member State. Obtaining an Irish Transport Manager CPC requires passing the examination administered by the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (CILT) on behalf of my Department.

Candidates who already hold a UK-issued Transport Manager CPC will not be required to undertake the training course of 100 hours that is normally mandatory before taking the examination. The next dates for the CILT Transport Manager CPC examination are 30 June and 24 November and candidates can register online with CILT for the examination (contact info@cilt.ie).

Alternatively, a licensed operator whose current Transport Manager holds a UK-issued Transport Manager CPC may contract a suitably qualified person as a designated replacement in the role of Transport Manager.

Affected road transport operators have been granted a period of six months under Article 13 of Regulation (EC) No 1071/2009 in which to take appropriate remedial action.

The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement does not include provision for mutual recognition of the Transport Manager CPC. It should be noted that the Transport Manager CPC qualification affords access to the wider single market.

Persons wishing to act as Transport Manager for a road transport operator established in an EU Member State, including in Ireland, must be resident in the EU in line with Regulation (EC) No 1071/2009. Given the particular situation on the island of Ireland, my Department sought clarification on this residency requirement from the European Commission, and it has been confirmed that the requirement stands.

Public Transport

29. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Transport the role of private security companies in policing within the transport infrastructure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27641/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport. The safety and security of passengers and staff, including arrangements to deal with anti-social behaviour, are matters first and foremost for the individual public transport companies in conjunction with, as appropriate, An Garda Síochána.

I have therefore forwarded your question to Iarnród Éireann, Bus Éireann, Dublin Bus and to Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), which has contracted Transdev to operate the Luas, for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Aviation Industry

30. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which plans are afoot or in hand to restore air passenger transport activity to pre-Covid levels; if antigen testing or air purification treatment systems can or will be used in the furtherance of this objective; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32415/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Government has put in place a range of supports for businesses, including the aviation sector. These supports include the wage subsidy scheme, waiving of commercial rates, deferral of tax liabilities, the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme, the Credit Guarantee Scheme, and the SBCI Working Capital Scheme. Liquidity funding is also available through the ISIF Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund for medium and large enterprises.

The main requirement of all aviation stakeholders has been clarity on a plan to permit the resumption of non-essential international air travel, and Government outlined such a plan on 28 May. This plan brings together the EU Digital COVID Certificates, pre-departure PCR testing, mandatory quarantine, and our public health measures so that international travel can operate safely. An “emergency brake” mechanism will also allow us to respond to the potential emergence of variants of concern. The new arrangements will come into effect on 19 July subject to public health considerations.

The use of antigen testing in relation to international travel is a matter for the Minister for Health in the first instance, and Government decisions relating to COVID-19 testing are based on public health advice.

The third issue (December 2020) of the Protocol for the Management of Air Passengers in light of COVID-19 is available at this link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ab625-protocols-for-international-travel/>. This protocol was created with due regard to material and information provided by ICAO, EASA and the ECDC, and does acknowledge the role of HEPA air filters in limiting virus transmission.

While it may take some time for our aviation sector to regain the strong economic position it had at the start of the pandemic, Government has committed to ensuring that there will be no “cliff-edge” to the COVID-19 related business supports that are currently available. On 1 June, Government launched its Economic Recovery Plan 2021 with the goal of achieving rapid job creation and economic growth after the pandemic. This plan sets out new measures

for businesses and affected sectors as the economy reopens, and details for existing emergency pandemic financial supports including the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), giving certainty to employers, workers, and for those who need it most. Importantly, this plan also recognised that additional support may be required for the recovery of the aviation sector.

With our vaccination programme progressing, a plan for the resumption of non-essential international travel ready and significant levels of business supports available, aviation is now positioned to begin to recover.

Traffic Management

31. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which he expects traffic vehicular volumes to return to pre-Covid levels or short thereof; if adequate provision is being made to ensure the smooth flow of traffic to and from the city to facilitate business and commerce; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32414/21]

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 operation and management of individual national roads, including the measurement of traffic volumes and traffic management, is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. In this context, TII is best placed to advise you.

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.

Greenways Provision

32. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Transport the position regarding the code of practice for greenways; the potential limitations of their development including the impact on biodiversity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32402/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Strategy for the Future Development of National and Regional Greenways emphasises that use of private lands for Greenway routes should only be considered after extensive consultation.

Based on the guidelines set out in this Strategy and as part of its work on the Galway to Dublin Greenway, Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) with Westmeath County Council is devising a Code of Best Practice for Greenways. This Code is being developed by a working group of stakeholders including representatives of the farming representative bodies. It is dealing with issues such as agreeing the consultation process, the factors to be considered when choosing a route, appropriate types of accommodation works, appropriate levels of payment for land, suitable types of access both for landowners and the public, ways of minimising severance, the range of possible mitigation and accommodation works and mechanisms to minimise disruption and to ensure the smooth and timely delivery of Greenway projects. This Code is being finalised and should be available shortly.

I would point out that all Project Managers of National and Regional Greenways, such as Local Authorities or Waterways Ireland, must comply with all EU and National Biodiversity

legislation at all stages of Greenway delivery. Page 18 of the Strategy on the Future Development of National and Regional Greenways points out the need to protect biodiversity and that Greenways should be designed to consider, and avoid where necessary, the sensitivities of natural heritage.

The Strategy further points out that where proposed Greenways are along existing natural ecological corridors such as rivers and canals, or across natural habitats such as coastal habitats, there is potential for people to access nature and to see and learn about our natural heritage.

The Strategy also outlines the potential to enhance the biodiversity value of an ecological corridor or other areas when planning for Greenways.

Proposed Greenways should also examine their potential to provide enhancement measures for the All-Ireland Pollinator Plan 2015-2020 and the “leave no trace” philosophy forms part of the promotion of all Greenways.

Rail Network

33. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Transport further to Parliamentary Question No. 78 of 26 May 2021, if his attention has been drawn to a proposal by Iarnród Éireann to fix the Barrow Bridge on the Waterford to Rosslare rail line in the closed to rail position later in June 2021; the potential damage this may do to the bridge; and if he will request that this proposal is deferred until the strategic rail review is completed. [32401/21]

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.

Transport Policy

34. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Transport if he has set targets for modal shift from private vehicles in cities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31583/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As transport accounts for a little over 20% of Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions there can be no doubt that the sector has a vital role to play in our national decarbonisation efforts. Private vehicles are the biggest emitting segment; as such, providing meaningful alternatives to everyday car journeys, especially in our cities, is fundamental to achieving our climate objectives.

As the Deputy is aware, the *Climate Action Plan (CAP) 2021* is currently being developed; as part of this process my Department has carried out analytical and modelling work to identify the various measures required to achieve a 51% reduction in transport emissions by 2030. *CAP 2021* will be published later this summer and will contain several key actions to decarbonise the transport sector, including those related to modal shift and managing demand for private car use. Regarding modal shift targets, the *CAP 2019* aimed for an additional 500,000 sustainable journeys in the transport system by 2035, I expect that under *CAP 2021* this ambition level will be raised further.

For this reason, continued and enhanced investment in sustainable mobility options is needed. The implementation of major public transport projects such as BusConnects, Connecting Ireland, the expansion of rail services and infrastructure, as well as a significant increase in our cycling and walking spending will be pivotal in fostering more sustainable trips. Achieving modal shift will be supported through the new 10-year *Sustainable Mobility Policy* which will be published later this year. The new *Policy* will include actions in the areas of behaviour change, demand management, and transport-led development, including multi-modal transport hubs to deliver modal shift and greater use of sustainable modes of transport.

In tandem, to promoting more sustainable travel modes we need to lessen car kilometres driven if we are to achieve the required 51% reduction in transport emissions. This is not about cancelling trips, but rather it is about reducing the need for and length of certain trips. Planning policy will continue to work to address low density/suburban sprawl, which increases the distance people must travel and ultimately can lock in car-dependent patterns of behaviour. Reducing car journeys offers many co-benefits in terms of citizen health, reducing congestion, and facilitating more accessible and vibrant communities.

In this regard, I am fully committed to exploring every means possible to shift towards low-carbon, affordable, and accessible mobility.

Greenways Provision

35. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the Programme for Government commitment to work with local authorities and appropriate agencies to continue to develop an integrated national network of greenways to be used by commuters, students, leisure cyclists and tourists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [21811/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I am pleased to announce that my Department is working well with local authorities, the National Transport Authority, Transport Infrastructure Ireland and other stakeholders on progressing work on the development of a national cycle network that will comprise a number of different types of cycling infrastructure including Greenways.

We have developed the mapping and signposting of Eurovelo 1 around the country from Donegal to Wexford. This signposting will be finished by September this year and will provide

a route that guides users along lower trafficked roads and Greenways for the most part.

That type of criteria will inform our development of a network of routes around the country that will also utilise, where appropriate, state forests, national parks and former peatland. It will also use cycle tracks, cycle lanes, quiet urban roads and utilise the significant increase in cycling and walking infrastructure that is at the heart of our commitment in the Programme for Government to support a change in how we travel to work, to school, for shopping and for leisure.

Since becoming Minister of Transport, I have had the privilege of awarding €4.5m funding to 26 Greenway projects around the country to assist them in progressing their feasibility, environmental, planning and design work to bring them further towards shovel ready status so that we have a pipeline of projects ready to fund over the coming years. I have also significantly increased the original funding to 9 Greenway construction projects to meet the shortfall in Local Authority co-funding that was caused by the pandemic.

We will see the preferred route option for Athlone - Galway Greenway published by year-end and see the start of construction of the Greenway bridge in Athlone for this project. I am also pleased to announce that additional funding has been allocated to Longford County Council to construct a number of looped routes from the Royal Canal onto former peatlands, thus showing our commitment to the Just Transition process and availing of the highly skilled Bord Na Móna staff who are providing this additional outdoor resource as we seek to improve and increase our outdoor recreation spaces for all. I have also this week announced funding for a section of the Grand Canal Greenway in South Dublin. This will extend the Greenway to Hazel Hatch bridge and link with the previously funded section from there to Sallins that Kildare County Council are in the process of delivering.

Bus Services

36. Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the disruption and cancellation of public bus services in the Waterford region and the associated impacts on public transport users; if he has plans to work with Bus Éireann and TFI to restore services to their usual schedule; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32121/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Both the National Transport Authority (NTA) and my Department have been engaging directly with commercial bus operators throughout the Covid-19 Emergency. The public transport system in Ireland has played an essential service role over the course of the pandemic, especially in carrying essential workers and others making necessary journeys.

In this regard, the Government agreed substantial increases to the PSO budget to support continuation of PSO services during the Covid situation in 2020 and 2021. In addition, the Government has recognised the situation of the licenced bus sector - which normally operates on a commercial basis without public subvention but which, during the Covid crisis, was in a situation where its operations were no longer commercially viable, owing to the impact of Covid-19 on passenger numbers and the associated drop in fare revenue.

Therefore, last June the Government decided to introduce new, temporary financial support for certain licensed services provided by commercial bus operators to ensure the continued operation of these essential services. The Expressway business operated by Bus Éireann is one of the many commercial operations of licenced public transport services that have been able to

avail of this new, temporary, Covid-related support.

The temporary support was initially introduced for a period of 6-months, with a view to protecting capacity across the public transport sector throughout the crisis. The NTA on behalf of my Department, entered into contracts with the licensed bus sector to provide funding for routes where a clear public interest justification supports such intervention.

As it remains the case that commercial bus operators are still under severe financial distress due to the fall in passenger numbers and associated drop in fare revenue as a result of Covid-19, on 26 January 2021, Government decided to extend the temporary funding supports for the licensed bus sector for a further period of 3 months, with an option to extend contracts on a monthly basis thereafter. The NTA, following consultation with operators, has recently finalised a review of the scheme and as a result some changes to services have been implemented.

Given the NTA's statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally, I have also forwarded the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Bus Services

37. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Transport the way the closure of bus routes across the country align with the need for more public transport to reduce dependency on cars and carbon emissions in line with Ireland's climate action goals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29426/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Both the National Transport Authority (NTA) and my Department have been engaging directly with commercial bus operators throughout the Covid-19 Emergency. The public transport system in Ireland has played an essential service role over the course of the pandemic, especially in carrying essential workers and others making necessary journeys.

In order to support the continued operation of public transport services throughout the crisis, despite the reduced demand and the restricted capacity owing to the Covid-19 situation, the Government is spending considerable additional Exchequer funds on the public transport sector. Government support for all public transport services in 2020 amounted to over €620m. By comparison, the level of PSO and Local Link funding provided in 2019 was in the region of €300m. The 2021 Exchequer allocation for PSO is just below €659m.

Further, last June the Government decided to introduce new, temporary financial support for certain licensed services provided by commercial bus operators to ensure the continued operation of these essential services. The Expressway business operated by Bus Éireann is one of the many commercial operations of licenced public transport services that have been able to avail of this new, temporary, Covid-related support.

The temporary support was initially introduced for a period of 6-months, with a view to protecting capacity across the public transport sector throughout the crisis. The NTA on behalf of my Department, entered into contracts with the licensed bus sector to provide funding for routes where a clear public interest justification supports such intervention.

As it remains the case that commercial bus operators are still under severe financial distress due to the fall in passenger numbers and associated drop in fare revenue as a result of Covid-19, on 26 January 2021, Government decided to extend the temporary funding supports for the licensed bus sector for a further period of 3 months, with an option to extend contracts on a

monthly basis thereafter. The NTA, following consultation with operators, has recently finalised a review of the scheme and as a result some changes to services have been implemented.

As transport accounts for a little over 20% of Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions, there can be no doubt that the sector has a vital role to play in our national decarbonisation efforts. Providing meaningful alternatives to everyday car journeys, especially in our cities, is fundamental to achieving our climate objectives.

The Climate Action Plan (CAP) 2021 will be published later this summer and will contain several key transport decarbonisation actions relating to modal shift and managing demand for private car use. Regarding modal shift targets, the CAP 2019 aimed for an additional 500,000 sustainable journeys in the transport system by 2035, and I expect that under CAP 2021 this ambition level will be raised further.

The current Programme for Government (PfG) sets out an ambitious and wide-ranging set of commitments in relation to public transport investment. These commitments will provide viable alternatives to car transport to reduce congestion and emissions, and enable the transport sector to cater for the demands associated with longer-term population and employment growth in a sustainable manner.

The implementation of major public transport projects such as BusConnects, Connecting Ireland, the expansion of rail services and infrastructure, as well as a significant increase in our cycling and walking spending will be pivotal in fostering more sustainable trips.

An important element of Ireland's climate action is the move toward low-emission vehicles. Under the National Development Plan (NDP), the NTA committed to no longer purchasing diesel-only urban buses from July 2019. To date, a total of 280 diesel-electric hybrid buses have been ordered, of which 100 should be operational by May 2021, with the remainder to be delivered before year end. The NTA is also tendering for both single and double-deck full electric town buses and piloting electric vehicles in rural areas under the Local Link programme.

Achieving modal shift will be supported through the new 10-year Sustainable Mobility Policy, which will be published later this year. The new Policy will include actions in the areas of behaviour change, demand management, and transport-led development, including multi-modal transport hubs to deliver modal shift and greater use of sustainable modes of transport.

In tandem to promoting more sustainable travel modes, we need to lessen car kilometres driven if we are to achieve the required 51% reduction in transport emissions. This is not about cancelling trips, but rather it is about reducing the need for and length of certain trips. Planning policy will continue to work to address low-density/suburban sprawl, which increases the distance people must travel and ultimately can lock in car-dependent patterns of behaviour. Increasing sustainable and active journeys offers many co-benefits in terms of citizen health, reducing congestion, and facilitating more accessible and vibrant communities.

In this regard, I am fully committed to exploring every means possible to shift towards low-carbon, affordable, and accessible mobility.

Public Transport

38. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the goals of an organisation (details supplied) in relation to the Ballybrophy Limerick line; and his further views on the adequacy of monthly supports being made available for the X8 bus route. [32431/21]

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.

On January 29, I met with a local community organisation, the North Tipperary Community Rail Partnership (NTCRP), to discuss a number of issues which it wished to raise in relation to services on the Ballybrophy line. Following that meeting, NTA representatives attended a meeting of Nenagh Municipal District on 18 February, at which representatives of NTCRP presented the case for improved infrastructure and additional services for the Ballybrophy rail line.

Iarnród Éireann also held a meeting with the NTCRP on March 9 in relation to the Ballybrophy line. Iarnród Éireann stated that its priority at this time was the restoration of services to pre-COVID-19 levels.

My Department has been advised by Iarnród Éireann that, following the completion of the relaying of 5 miles of continuous welded rail on the line, it will run an empty train Limerick-Ballybrophy-Limerick on Sunday in preparation for all services to return to normal on Monday morning 21st June as planned. In addition, I understand that Iarnród Éireann are to reschedule a recently postponed meeting with the NTCRP at a time that suits all concerned. I understand the issues of concern to NTCRP and referred to by the Deputy will again form part of those discussions.

In relation to the X8 bus route - both the National Transport Authority (NTA) and my Department have been engaging directly with commercial bus operators throughout the Covid-19 Emergency. The public transport system in Ireland has played an essential service role over the course of the pandemic, especially in carrying essential workers and others making necessary journeys.

In this regard, the Government agreed substantial increases to the PSO budget to support continuation of PSO services during the Covid situation in 2020 and 2021. In addition, the Government has recognised the situation of the licenced bus sector - which normally operates on a commercial basis without public subvention but which, during the Covid crisis, was in a situation where its operations were no longer commercially viable, owing to the impact of Covid-19 on passenger numbers and the associated drop in fare revenue.

Therefore, last June the Government decided to introduce new, temporary financial support for certain licensed services provided by commercial bus operators to ensure the continued operation of these essential services. The Expressway business operated by Bus Éireann is one of the many commercial operations of licenced public transport services that have been able to avail of this new, temporary, Covid-related support.

The temporary support was initially introduced for a period of 6-months, with a view to protecting capacity across the public transport sector throughout the crisis. The NTA on behalf of my Department, entered into contracts with the licensed bus sector to provide funding for routes where a clear public interest justification supports such intervention.

As it remains the case that commercial bus operators are still under severe financial distress due to the fall in passenger numbers and associated drop in fare revenue as a result of Covid-19, on 26 January 2021, Government decided to extend the temporary funding supports for the licensed bus sector for a further period of 3 months, with an option to extend contracts on a monthly basis thereafter. The NTA, following consultation with operators, has recently finalised a review of the scheme and as a result some changes to services have been implemented.

Given the NTA's statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger

transport services nationally, I have also forwarded the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Bus Éireann

39. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Transport the progress of expanding and developing Bus Éireann services in Cork City and more specifically the consideration that is being taken on direct public transport links from Ballincollig to the various industrial estates in the city and hinterland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32434/21]

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

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally, in conjunction with the transport operators, in this case Bus Éireann. I have, therefore, referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Rail Network

40. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Transport the potential of commuter rail to allow regional cities to grow in a sustainable manner; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32142/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy is aware, transport investment in our regional cities is now guided by the development of metropolitan area transport strategies which set out programmes of proposed transport investment in active travel, bus and rail for each metropolitan area. This evidence based, plan-led transport planning will, I believe, allow the regional cities to grow in a sustainable and compact manner, as informed by the National Planning Framework and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies.

There has already been substantial progress in relation to rail in the regional cities. A feasibility study has been undertaken in Galway in relation to proposed improvements along the Athenry to Galway corridor and investment announced under the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) to support infrastructure works at Oranmore station and improvement at Ceannt Station. URDF funding has also been announced to support the movement of Waterford's Plunkett Station to the North Quays. In Limerick, options are being considered for the enhancement of rail services in the city region as part of the development of its metropolitan area transport strategy, while in Cork, the start of a major investment in the metropolitan rail network for the city was recently announced as part of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan.

I believe our policy for the regional cities must be to encourage transport-led development along high-capacity public transport corridors, including our commuter rail networks. This can allow for the development of sustainable and well-connected communities where active travel becomes the preferred mode of travel for many localised journeys and good quality public transport is available to facilitate longer journeys into the major urban centres.

Road Projects

41. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the northern ring road. [32435/21]

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 status of this project.

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.

Road Projects

42. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the progress of the cycleway and pedestrian way at a location (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32404/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I understand from Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) that the N71 Glasslinn Pavement Strengthening Scheme is at Tender stage. As part of the scheme, they are widening the existing footpath from 1.8m to 3m from the Kevin O’Leary Roundabout towards the Clare O’Leary Walk, for 950m.

The Clare O’Leary Walk (old railway line) is a further 800m away further along the N71. Cork County Council are pursuing the completion of the scheme (800m) separately.

I understand that this project is proposed to be a pedestrian facility and as my Department does not have a role in rural walkway schemes, I am not in a position to answer this aspect.

Road Projects

43. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the Narrow Water bridge project; the recent engagements he has had in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32426/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The North South Ministerial Council on 5th May 2021 noted the commitments in New Decade, New Approach in relation to the Narrow Water Bridge and agreed that Departments will consider next steps to progress the scheme.

The project will now transfer to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage who will work with Louth County Council and other stakeholders to bring this project forward.

Transport Policy

44. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Transport the measures he is examin-

ing to reduce dependency on cars in rural areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31923/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Deputy has highlighted a very important issue which needs to be addressed in both rural and urban Ireland – the need to increase the capacity of our sustainable mobility infrastructure and services to ensure more people can make the switch to a sustainable option as their preferred transport mode.

As the Deputy is aware my Department is developing a new 10-year Sustainable Mobility Policy which will be published later this year. The new policy will be closely aligned with the national strategic outcomes of the *National Planning Framework* including in relation to enhanced regional accessibility and strengthened rural economies and it will support an expansion of rural and regional sustainable mobility options.

Complementing the new policy is *Connecting Ireland*, an initiative of the National Transport Authority (NTA) to address the gaps in connections to local and regional centres in rural areas, and to allow for the possibility of access to local services without the need for a car. It is based on a nationwide study performed by the NTA to inform its approach to rolling out improved public transport across the country (excluding the Greater Dublin Area, Regional Cities and Large Towns) by providing better connections between villages and towns by linking them with an enhanced regional network connecting cities and regional centres nationwide.

The NTA plans to undertake a public consultation process on *Connecting Ireland* later this year prior to finalisation of the proposals and submission to my Department. I look forward to hearing the views of public representatives and the public on this key initiative to improve connections in rural areas and reduce car dependency.

Rail Network

45. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Transport the way in which the western rail corridor can help to decarbonise transportation in the west of Ireland, helping the State to reach its climate action goals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32450/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The current Programme for Government (PfG) sets out an ambitious and wide-ranging set of commitments in relation to public transport investment, which will provide viable alternatives to car transport to reduce congestion and emissions, and enable the transport sector to cater for the demands associated with longer-term population and employment growth in a sustainable manner. Regarding modal shift targets, the *Climate Action Plan (CAP) 2019* aimed for an additional 500,000 sustainable journeys in the transport system by 2035, and I expect that under *CAP 2021* this ambition level will be raised further. The *Climate Action Plan (CAP) 2021* will be published later this summer and will contain several key transport decarbonisation actions.

The Government has planned a transformative programme of planned rail investment, with electrification of the rail network playing an important role for future public transport provision. Projects such as DART+, Luas expansions, Luas Cork, and MetroLink will provide sustainable, reliable, and frequent rail services and significantly increase capacity on rail corridors around the country.

The PfG committed to consider the future of the Western Rail Corridor and take appropriate action. As the Deputy knows, in January my Department published both Iarnród Éireann's financial and economic appraisal (*EY Report*) and an independent review, which had been commissioned by my Department and conducted by JASPERS (Joint Assistance to Support Projects

in the European Regions)—an agency of the European Investment Bank/EU Commission. This review noted a number of shortcomings in relation to the proposed re-opening of the Western Rail Corridor Phases 2 and 3—in particular around issues such as the need to demonstrate the strategic role of the proposal and how it sat within the broader proposed development of the network.

As a result, I stated my intention, in co-operation with the Department for Infrastructure (Northern Ireland), to prepare a strategy for the development of the railway sector on the island of Ireland over the period to 2040. The *Strategic Rail Review* will examine the role of rail in supporting relevant policy objectives in both Ireland and Northern Ireland with particular emphasis on achieving climate change objectives. The *Review* will strategically assess 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 considering the role of rail freight. In addition, the *Review* will consider how we might decarbonise our rail services both on the main inter-urban routes and on inter-regional routes. This analysis will include an examination of the Western Rail Corridor.

As transport accounts for a little over 20% of Ireland’s greenhouse gas emissions, there can be no doubt that the sector has a vital role to play in our national decarbonisation efforts. Providing meaningful alternatives to everyday car journeys across the country is fundamental to achieving our climate objectives. Increasing sustainable and active journeys offers many co-benefits in terms of citizen health, reducing congestion, and facilitating more accessible and vibrant communities. In this regard, I am fully committed to exploring every means possible to shift towards low-carbon, affordable, and accessible mobility.

Taxi Licences

46. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Transport if he will expand the nine-year rule requiring taxis to be younger than nine years and consider a temporary extension of this (details supplied). [32437/21]

48. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to extend the ten-year rule for taxi drivers in view of the severe impact that Covid-19 has had on the industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32403/21]

207. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if he has considered a review of the nine-year rule in regard to the taxi industry; and if older vehicles having passed a strict NCT test could be permitted to operate as taxis. [32598/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 46, 48 and 207 together.

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

At the start of the pandemic, the NTA, which is the independent regulator of the SPSV sector, immediately extended age limits for taxis and hackneys and has done so twice more since. The most recent extension, made last month, ensures no vehicle will be forced to exit the fleet due to age limits in 2021 and I trust that the Authority will keep this issue under review as society and the economy reopens and passenger demand returns.

Road Network

47. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport if further much needed funding will be allocated in 2021 for the non-national road network if there is a capital funding reallocation within his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32407/21]

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

The National Development Plan (NDP), as it stands, provides for a gradual increase in funding for regional and local roads and there has been a significant increase in Exchequer funding particularly in the last four years. Funding is not yet at the level needed for the adequate maintenance and renewal of regional and local roads and so for this reason, the primary focus for capital investment continues to be the maintenance and renewal of the network with some limited investment in road improvement projects.

I announced the 2021 regional and local road allocations earlier this year and all grant funding available to my Department has now been allocated.

As regards the Department's budgets more generally, drawdown on capital spending varies from month to month and it is too soon to determine whether any slower than expected drawdowns at the start of the year will lead to a gross capital underspend for the entire year. In addition, as capital is allocated to support specific investment programmes and projects, in the first instance it will need to be determined whether the capital should be 'carried' into the next fiscal year to continue to support the programmes and projects in question.

Question No. 48 answered with Question No. 46.

Aviation Industry

49. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the ongoing talks with a company (detail supplied) to broker a rescue package; if he will report on his efforts to secure the reinstatement of the Shannon Airport base, strategic routes from Shannon to Heathrow, New York and Boston and commitments in relation to Shannon-Heathrow slots as part of this deal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31115/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): Both Minister Ryan and I met with the Aer Lingus CEO soon after their base closures announcement, and they did confirm that there is no strategic intent to reduce connectivity at Shannon Airport, but that the restoration of air services would depend on market conditions. It was clear from my discussions that the priority for Aer Lingus, and for all aviation stakeholders, is clarity on plans for re-opening international travel.

On 28 May, the Government set out its plan for the resumption of non-essential international air travel, with effect from 19 July. This plan is built around EU Digital COVID Certificates and other proofs of vaccination, pre-departure PCR testing and mandatory quarantine that will allow international travel to operate safely. An "emergency brake" mechanism will also allow us to respond to the potential emergence of variants of concern. The plan includes a framework for the safe return of air travel from US and other third country routes.

On 1 June, Government launched its Economic Recovery Plan 2021 with the goal of achiev-

ing rapid job creation and economic growth after the pandemic. This plan sets out new measures for businesses and affected sectors as the economy reopens, and details for existing emergency pandemic financial supports including the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), giving certainty to employers, workers, and for those who need it most.

My officials and I have maintained regular contact with key stakeholders throughout this crisis, and Government has put in place a range of supports for businesses, including the aviation sector. These supports include the wage subsidy scheme, waiving of commercial rates, deferral of tax liabilities, the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme, the Credit Guarantee Scheme, and the SBCI Working Capital Scheme. It is estimated that, by the end of June this year, our airlines and airports will have received at least €300 million from several available supports. Liquidity funding is also available through the ISIF Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund for medium and large enterprises.

While it may take some time for our aviation sector to regain the strong economic position it had at the start of the pandemic, Government has committed to ensuring that there will be no “cliff-edge” to the COVID-19 related business supports that are currently available.

As regards the Heathrow slots, Aer Lingus entered into certain commitments at the time of its acquisition by IAG in 2015 in relation to the operation of its London Heathrow slots. These commitments are, however, subject to certain *force majeure* provisions, which are defined to include an “epidemic or pandemic”. The reduction in Aer Lingus frequencies to London Heathrow is therefore in accordance with these provisions.

Park-and-Ride Facilities

50. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Transport further to Parliamentary Question No. 47 of 24 March 2021, the status of the roll-out of park-and-ride facilities for Galway city; the number and locations of all sites identified to date from which to operate park-and-ride services; the status of the public consultation process for the cross-city link and Dublin Road BusConnects corridors; if an application for planning permission been made in this regard to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32124/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure, including BusConnects and associated Park & Ride facilities in Galway.

As we have previously discussed, I would note that that the successful development of bus-based park and ride in Galway city is linked to the roll-out of BusConnects Galway, otherwise developing park-and-ride sites without developing improved bus infrastructure and services will simply fail.

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

Transport Policy

51. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Transport if he plans to fast-track pro-

curement for and delivery of transport infrastructure projects in the north-west to boost regional development, employment and connectivity in response to Brexit and the impact of Covid-19 in the region; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29515/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Transport investment in all the major cities including Galway is guided by the development of the metropolitan area transport strategies. This move toward evidence based, plan-led transport planning for our major cities is to be welcomed and allows for consideration of all relevant issues and the potential role all modes of transport can play in addressing those issues. I would also note that providing this type of long-term investment framework represents international best practice in the area of transport planning.

I would also point out that the National Transport Authority (NTA) works collaboratively with local authorities outside the Galway Metropolitan Area on a regular basis. It has worked successfully on an administrative, non-statutory basis to assist several local authorities across the North Western region in preparing transport related strategies or implementing transport related projects.

I am eager to see progress on the delivery of the Galway Transport Strategy and welcome the non-statutory consultations held last year on two of the key Galway BusConnects corridors. I look forward to the delivery of much improved active travel infrastructure in the next few years as well as improvements to the commuter rail network, such as the proposals in relation to Ceannt Station, Oranmore Station and indeed the Athenry to Galway rail corridor generally. I note that as it is now six years since the publication of the Galway Transport Strategy a review is likely warranted and I believe that such a review could commence next year.

As the Deputy may be aware, my Department is undertaking a Strategic Rail Review. This Review, for which my Department in consultation with the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland and relevant Stakeholders such as Iarnród Éireann, Translink and the National Transport Authority developed the terms of reference, will be on an all-island rail network basis.

The Review will consider all issues in relation to inter-urban and inter-regional rail connectivity, including the potential for high-/higher speed(s), rail freight and, the Deputy may wish to note, improved connectivity to the North-West. This will be one of the most significant reviews of the rail network on the island in many years and will provide a framework to develop a much-improved rail network in the years ahead.

For the Deputy's information, work in the Review should commence in the summer and while the ultimate duration of the review will be determined by the work programmes submitted by tenderers, it is a requirement of the published request for tender that the work take no longer than 12 months in total.

The National Development Plan (NDP), which is currently being reviewed, sets out the current funding provision and the priorities for development. The NDP names the major projects that are to be progressed within the period of the plan and TII delivers on these projects with its local authority partners in so far as funding, resources, processes and procedure allows.

Projects are also delivered under the requirements of the public spending code and project business cases are assessed at the relevant decision gates, based on the scheme objectives, including regional development and connectivity, amongst other objectives.

On the smaller projects, such as pavement and safety, these projects are selected based on national reviews and on a needs basis.

Oireachtas Committees

52. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Transport if he plans to act upon the recommendations of the recent report of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Transport on decarbonisation and public transport; if the process of examining the provision of free public transport will commence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32212/21]

74. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Transport if he will consider the latest report of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Environment and Climate Action on the topic of emissions from the transport sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32141/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 52 and 74 together.

To help tackle our climate challenge, I am strongly committed to achieving substantial carbon abatement within the transport sector. Accounting for a little over one fifth of Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions, there can be no question but that transport must feature strongly in contributing towards the national decarbonisation effort. As such, I welcome the recent report from the Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action on reducing emissions in the transport sector by 51% by 2030. Indeed, the publication is very timely given that both the *Climate Action Plan* and *National Development Plan* are currently undergoing review. The Committee's report provides a strong evidence base to assist in the development of these two key *Plans*.

It is becoming increasingly clear that a transformational change is required to achieve a carbon free transport sector by 2050 and more imminently to halve emissions over the next decade. In preparation for the *Climate Action Plan*, my Department has conducted significant analytical and modelling work to help identify the nature and scale of measures required to achieve the step-up in emissions reduction. Preliminary findings of this analysis align closely with the conclusions of the Joint Oireachtas Committee, particularly in relation to promoting more sustainable trips, managing travel demand, achieving greater EV penetration as well as needing to decarbonise the hard-to-abate freight sector.

I am committed to giving due consideration to all 47 recommendations from the Committee's Report, including those relating to public transport fare structures, to chart an informed course to reduce transport emissions in line with our *Programme for Government* commitment. The Deputy should note that as the National Transport Authority has the statutory responsibility for the regulation of fares in relation to public passenger transport services, any assessment of a proposed change to public transport fare structures would be a matter for them in the first instance. I have, therefore, forwarded the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Transport Policy

53. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Transport further to Parliamentary Question No. 47 of 24 March 2021 and his comments in Dáil Éireann on the same date, his plans to bring forward the review of the Galway Transport Strategy, in particular the promised feasibility study for light rail; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32123/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Let me start by saying I share the Deputy's resolve in relation to increasing the range and capacity of sustainable mobility options available to the people of Galway. As the Deputy knows, I agree with her on the merits of a

feasibility study for light rail in Galway. I have previously stated how I believe that its potential, or otherwise, could best be considered within the context of the review of the Galway Transport Strategy generally to allow for a multi-modal perspective and importantly integration within an overall land-use plan.

In terms of the timing of that review, I have no plans to bring forward the review which will be led by the National Transport Authority, in co-operation with relevant local authorities. The review will be undertaken next year as committed to previously and will complement the review of the Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area which is underway, as well as the development of transport strategies for both Limerick and Waterford which are either underway or scheduled to commence this year.

I also know from meeting many different stakeholders in the region the urgent need to focus on delivering the key elements of the existing Galway Transport Strategy such as BusConnects. I will continue to support the local authority in that regard with funding and other assistance offered through the National Transport Authority. I look forward to the Deputy's support as we seek to deliver on this ambition in the years ahead.

Aviation Industry

54. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Transport his engagements with trade unions, employees and the management of a company (details supplied) in relation to proposed changes to work practices and the arrangements for the temporary closure of Cork airport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32416/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The temporary closure of Aer Lingus's crew base at Cork Airport aligns with the airports planned closure to carry out construction works on its main runway and associated infrastructure. In addition to the announced lay offs for the period, the airline also reported that they will be seeking a number of redundancies. The airline has indicated that such immediate actions and wider structural changes are to address the impact that COVID-19 has had.

Aer Lingus has stated that it will emerge from the pandemic as a smaller airline, and the temporary closure of their crew base at Cork Airport and the laying off of a number of their staff is a commercial decision for them. Both Minister Ryan and I met with their CEO soon after their announcement, and they did confirm that there is no strategic intent to reduce connectivity at Cork Airport, but that the restoration of air services would depend on market conditions.

The Government has now set out its plan for the resumption of non-essential international air travel, scheduled to begin on 19 July. This plan is built around EU Digital COVID Certificates and other proofs of vaccination, pre-departure PCR testing and mandatory quarantine that will allow international travel to operate safely. An "emergency brake" mechanism will also allow us to respond to the potential emergence of variants of concern.

While it may take some time for our aviation sector to regain the strong economic position it had at the start of the pandemic, Government has committed to ensuring that there will be no "cliff-edge" to the COVID-19 related business supports that are currently available.

Rail Network

55. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to decarbonise Ire-

land's passenger rail fleet; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31506/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Decarbonisation of our society and economy is obviously a key policy priority for Government and transport has a significant role to play in that regard.

An important part of that role is the expansion of sustainable mobility options in our major urban centres and across the country to enable people to make the switch toward more sustainable modes – active travel, bus and rail. This will require significant investment in our infrastructure and services and the *Programme for Government - Our Shared Future* commits toward such a fundamental change in the nature of transport in Ireland and I look forward to seeing the change occur in the coming years.

I am also clear that within our sustainable mobility sector, or more particularly within public transport, we need to transition toward low-emission and zero-emission fleets in line with available technologies.

In rail, the key focus has been to expand electrification through the DART+ programme of investment which, once completed, will mean around 70% of passenger journeys across the rail network will be on electrified services. This will represent a significant shift from the position of today. The scope to electrify rail services in the other cities has been, or is being, considered their metropolitan area transport strategies are developed.

In terms of inter-urban rail, which is a much smaller component of total annual passenger journeys as compared to that covered by the DART+ programme, I have stated my commitment to conduct a *Strategic Rail Review* and it is my intention that one of the issues that Review will consider will be future decarbonisation of the inter-city / inter-regional networks. I would note that there is no settled perspective on this matter in a European context, as evidenced by the EU's recently published *Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy* which references the requirement for further electrification but also notes that electrification may not be viable in all cases. It is my intention that the forthcoming *Review* will give an Irish dimension to that European perspective.

Rail Network

56. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Transport if he will consider the re-opening of closed train stations including the Avoca train station in County Wicklow to increase access to public transport and reduce car dependency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31815/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding of public transport. The operation, maintenance and renewal of the rail network and stations on the network including the former station referred to, is a matter for Iarnród Éireann in the first instance in consultation with the National Transport Authority (NTA).

The Deputy may wish to be aware of the NTA's ongoing review of the statutory Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area. The Transport Strategy is the statutory transport plan for the Greater Dublin Area, including Wicklow, and issues such as this would usefully inform its review as it looks to develop a revised twenty year framework for transport infrastructure and services across the region.

In view of the NTA's responsibility in this matter, I have referred the Deputy's question to it

for direct reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Greenways Provision

57. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the development and provision of funding for the section of the Grand Canal Greenway from the 12th Lock to the Hatch Pub Bridge near Hazelhatch; if additional funding will be made available for this project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32203/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department recently allocated €1.4m to co-fund the construction of the Grand Canal Greenway from 12th Lock to Hazelhatch Bridge. South Dublin County Council are providing €2.1m to support this project.

This work will be completed in 2022 and will enable people to walk and cycle from Inchicore to Hazel Hatch Bridge and later in 2023 as far as Sallins in County Kildare.

This will tie in with Kildare County Council's work on the Grand Canal Greenway. They were previously funded to the amount of €3m to bring the Greenway from Hazel Hatch Bridge to Sallins.

It will also tie in with the work on the Canal Loop Greenway from the 12th Lock through Lucan to the Royal Canal that went out for public consultation by South Dublin County Council in April 2021.

This key small 4km section will provide safe segregated access to people working in Grange Castle Business Park and living in Hazelhatch and Celbridge and surrounding areas. It shows the multi-functional role that Greenways have in terms of access to Schools and Workplaces as well as for leisure and tourism purposes.

Road Network

58. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Transport the status of local and regional road infrastructure in counties Cavan and Monaghan. [22864/21]

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

As regards State funding for regional and local roads, there were major cutbacks in funding for the road network in general during the post 2008 recession. The National Development Plan (NDP), as it stands, provides for a gradual increase in funding for regional and local roads and there has been a significant increase in Exchequer funding particularly in the last four years. In this context, this year Cavan County Council received a total allocation of €15,484,815 and Monaghan County Council received a total allocation of €16,006,398, including funding for a number of pilot schemes relating to road materials.

I also recently announced the details of a €17.3 million investment package for climate adaptation works on regional and local roads with a view to making the network more resilient. Cavan County Council received an allocation of €522,050 and Monaghan County Council received an allocation of €440,000.

My Department is currently providing grant support under the Strategic Improvement Grant Programme to Cavan County Council for the East West route. The Department is currently liaising with the Council in relation to carrying out a risk based analysis for the route between Dundalk and Cavan.

Monaghan County Council received an allocation of €100,000 this year under the Strategic Improvement Grant Programme for the N2 to N12 Link road (Monaghan Business Park) in order to facilitate detailed appraisal of the scheme.

Rail Network

59. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Transport the progress of the DART underground; the timeline to its completion; the estimated benefits that it would bring to the greater Dublin area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32452/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy may be aware DART+ is a multi-billion euro programme to upgrade rail services in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) and will effectively double the capacity of the network compared to today. The programme will significantly expand the electrified heavy rail commuter rail network in the GDA through expanded fleet and improved infrastructure.

Planning and design has continued on the development of DART+, the largest ever investment in our rail infrastructure and services, and I will bring a memorandum to Government in the coming months seeking approval for that programme to move forward to the next Decision Gate under the Public Spending Code, which will be a hugely significant step forward.

I very much look forward to seeing the DART+ programme progress in the coming years.

In relation to the proposed DART Underground, the issue is being considered as part of the review of the *Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area* led by the National Transport Authority (NTA). The review will include a comprehensive analysis of changes to population projections, development density, employment forecasts and future travel demand patterns across the Greater Dublin Area and will be subject to a full public consultation, including the publication of all background reports and feasibility studies. That NTA-led public consultation will take place later this year and I would encourage public representatives and interested citizens to participate.

Rail Network

60. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the proposed extension of the LUAS line to Lucan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31711/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure, including the provision of light rail.

As the Deputy may be aware, the NTA's Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area, published in 2016, proposes a Luas line for the Lucan Area and the National Development Plan published in 2018 provides funding for the appraisal, planning and design of LUAS network expansion to Lucan.

Given their responsibility in relation to this matter, I have forwarded your query to the NTA for a direct reply. Please notify my office if you have not received a response within 10 working days.

Driver Test

61. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Transport the measures he will put in place to address the backlog in driver theory tests. [32043/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): In line with the further easing of restrictions, the gradual re-opening of in-person driver theory test centres commenced on the 8th of June. The Road Safety Authority (RSA) will reopen its network of test centres and will be permitted to conduct 25,000 driver theory tests per month.

Prior to COVID-19, the RSA provided 15,000 tests per month. In light of the significant backlog of customers, the RSA will gradually increase capacity in its test centres to 25,000 tests a month.

The test centres have extensive COVID-19 measures in place to protect both customers and staff and to ensure the safe delivery of the service. It is hoped that capacity will gradually increase to 50,000 tests per month over time, if public health guidance permits.

The RSA has been working to deliver an online theory test service, with a pilot online test already underway for trucks and buses. This pilot service has now been extended to include a limited number of car and motorbike tests.

The new offering will see 4,000 online theory tests available for all categories of vehicles per month. From mid-June, the RSA plans to increase this by a further 6,000. Tests are available on a first-come-first-served basis with the new online service becoming more widely available later in the year.

Question No. 62 answered with Question No. 23.

Rail Network

63. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport if there is a timeline in place for when work will begin on the Cork commuter rail corridor following the recent announcement of funding of €185 million; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31857/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy may be aware, the Cork Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy (CMATS) sets out an ambitious programme of proposed investment in the Cork rail network which will greatly benefit the city region and facilitate compact growth in the coming years. The National Transport Authority (NTA) is working with Iarnród Éireann to develop an implementation plan to deliver the CMATS' proposals and - together with the forthcoming revision of the National Development Plan - this will be central to the way in which the public transport development envisaged by CMATS will be brought into effect over the coming years.

Furthermore, my Department is currently engaging with colleagues across Government in relation to the preparation of Ireland's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP). The transport component of the NRRP comprises an investment in Cork's rail network to support

the longer-term objective to provide electrified rail services in the Cork metropolitan area, as set out in the CMATS. This is the largest single project proposed for inclusion in the NRRP and consists of the following works:

- Construction of a new ‘through’ platform within Kent Station to create a suburban rail network between Mallow, Midleton and Cobh;
- Re-signalling of the suburban rail network (62km of track); and
- Double-tracking of current single track between Glounthaune and Midleton (approximately 6 - 8km).

In line with the requirements set by the European Union for inclusion within recovery and resilience plans all works should be completed by end 2026, while it is expected that the works at Kent Station should be completed by end 2024.

Question No. 64 answered with Question No. 13.

Rail Network

65. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Transport his views on whether the increase in freight services between counties Mayo and Waterford further demonstrates the need for the western rail corridor; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32445/21]

199. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the progress of the Strategic Rail Review and work to support the expansion of railway investment including commuter services in urban areas and also regional services such as the Western Rail Corridor. [32453/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 65 and 199 together.

I very much welcome the increase in freight services referred to by the Deputy and note this new service from the West to the Port of Waterford utilizes the existing rail network from the West without the need for any additional rail infrastructure.

I do believe that rail can play a greater role in freight generally in Ireland and that role needs to be explored fully. That is why the *Strategic Rail Review*, which will commence very shortly, will consider the potential for rail freight on the island of Ireland.

The *Strategic Rail Review* will examine how to improve sustainable connectivity between the major cities, enhance regional accessibility, support balanced regional development and improve rail connectivity to our international gateways, with the latter considering the role of rail freight. The *Review* will consider the potential scope for improved rail services and infrastructure along the various existing, or future potential, corridors of the network including disused and closed lines.

My Department launched the procurement process in April and the tender process is underway. Once completed, I expect work on the *Review* itself to commence shortly thereafter. While the ultimate duration of the *Review* will be determined by the work programmes submitted by tenderers it is a requirement of the published request for tender that the work take no longer than 12 months.

The *Review* will not be considering urban commuter rail as that consideration takes place

within each of the five cities' metropolitan area transport strategies; however, obviously the *Review* will consider the interactions between any improved inter-urban rail service and the urban commuter rail services. There are a number of improvements planned or underway in relation to urban commuter rail, such as –

- Dublin: the DART+ programme will be brought later this year to Government for its approval under the Public Spending Code's Decision Gate 1, which will allow the first element of the programme enter the statutory planning process;

- Greater Dublin Area: 41 additional rail carriages for the wider Greater Dublin Area commuter rail fleet are under construction with delivery scheduled for next year;

- Cork: a €185million investment in Cork's commuter rail network has been included in Ireland's National Recovery & Resilience Plan as submitted to the European Commission. Inclusion in the Plan commits toward all works being completed by late 2026;

- Galway: funding has been announced for redevelopment of Ceannt Station and track and station improvements at Oranmore and both projects are scheduled to be completed by 2024;

- Limerick: works are planned to upgrade Colbert Station, while the city's rail network is under review as part of the development of the metropolitan area transport strategy; and

- Waterford : funding has been announced to support the move of Plunkett Station to a new location on the North Quays.

Rail Network

66. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Transport the steps he is taking to ensure the safety of passengers on the DART. [32247/21]

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. The safety and security of passengers and staff, including arrangements to deal with anti-social behaviour, are matters first and foremost for the individual public transport companies in conjunction with, as appropriate, An Garda Síochána.

The query raised in relation to the safety of passengers on the DART is a matter for Iarnród Éireann in the first instance 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.

Aviation Industry

67. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport the position regarding and his views on the job losses and reduced wages affecting workers in the aviation sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31505/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The Irish aviation sector is critical to Ireland's economic development, as it is a key enabler of international trade and business, including foreign direct investment and tourism. For this reason, our aviation policy places a priority on international connectivity. The sector is experiencing

the most challenging crisis in its history, with many analysts predicting that it will take several years for it to return to 2019 levels of activity.

All service providers in the sector, apart from those substantially or exclusively dedicated to air cargo, have had no option but to radically address their cost base and seek to safeguard liquidity. Alongside rationalisation measures, the major service providers are shoring up their finances through increased borrowings or raising new capital.

Several public health measures have been introduced in relation to international travel, which have developed and evolved as the pandemic has progressed, with the objective of both limiting the spread of COVID-19 and limiting the presence of its variants of concern in Ireland.

The main requirement of all aviation stakeholders has been clarity from Government on a plan to permit the resumption of non-essential international air travel, and the Government outlined such a plan on 28 May, which is scheduled to begin on 19 July. This plan brings together the EU Digital COVID Certificates, pre-departure PCR testing, mandatory quarantine, and our public health measures so that international travel can operate safely. An “emergency brake” mechanism will also allow us to respond to the potential emergence of variants of concern.

While it may take some time for our aviation sector to regain the strong economic position it had at the start of the pandemic, Government has committed to ensuring that there will be no “cliff-edge” to the COVID-19 related business supports that are currently available. On 1 June, Government launched its Economic Recovery Plan 2021 with the goal of achieving rapid job creation and economic growth after the pandemic. This plan sets out new measures for businesses and affected sectors as the economy reopens, and details for existing emergency pandemic financial supports including the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), giving certainty to employers, workers, and for those who need it most. Importantly, this plan also recognised that additional support may be required for the recovery of the aviation sector.

With our vaccination programme progressing, a plan for the resumption of non-essential international travel ready and significant levels of business supports available, aviation is now positioned to begin to recover.

Action Plan for Rural Development

68. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Transport the proposals his Department is working on in conjunction with the NTA on the Action Plan for Rural Development to work with rural communities to assess and implement improvements to existing rural transport routes and develop new rural transport routes as necessary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32433/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport.

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

In addition, “Our Rural Future - Rural Development Policy 2021-2025”, the successor to the Action Plan for Rural Development, was officially launched on 29 March 2021. It contains a number of commitments to improve rural public transport services and pilot new transport initiatives for people of all ages and abilities living in rural areas.

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

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

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

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

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

Arising from this study, I am advised that the NTA has now completed the first phase of consultation on its proposals, titled 'Connecting Ireland', with all Local Authorities and is now engaging with Regional Authorities and other key stakeholders. This will be followed by a wider public consultation in Q3 2021 prior to finalisation of the proposals by the NTA and submission to my Department.

Covid-19 Pandemic

69. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport if rapid antigen testing will be put in place in order to accommodate the opening of international travel over the summer months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31856/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): Our public health authorities are responsible for determining the most appropriate testing regimes for COVID-19 in Ireland, and Government is guided by their recommendations. The Government has decided that for testing for inbound international travel to Ireland a Covid-19 Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test is currently the only test that is accepted.

Transport Policy

70. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to disparities in sustainable transport access in Cork city. [32436/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I can assure the Deputy that I am fully aware of the need to improve sustainable mobility services and infrastructure in the Cork metropolitan area.

As he is likely aware, the *Cork Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy (CMATS)*, which was published last year, sets out an ambitious programme of proposed investment in sustainable mobility for the city in the coming years. The *Strategy* adopts the multi-modal approach to transport planning that has proven successful in many city regions internationally; it provides the necessary evidence-based, and plan-led framework that can guide investment in Cork over the short, medium and longer term. This type of approach is exactly the type of long-term planning needed to ensure effective transport access.

The *CMATS* has a number of significant public transport proposals across bus, commuter rail and light rail together with the proposed transformation of active travel infrastructure in the city region. I am glad to say there are a number of important steps already in progress in this regard.

The Deputy will be aware that the *CMATS* involves the delivery of a BusConnects Cork programme of improved bus and active travel infrastructure and a redesigned network of bus services.

Complementing this investment, it is also proposed to develop a light rail service running on an east to west corridor across the city and, in advance of its introduction, BusConnects Cork will deliver a high-capacity, high-frequency bus corridor along the route.

Route options analysis has started on both the BusConnects infrastructure project and the light rail proposal, while work has also started on the BusConnects network redesign.

The Deputy may also be aware that a €185 million investment in Cork's commuter rail network project was recently announced as part of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP). The transport component of the NRRP comprises an investment in Cork's rail network to support the longer-term objective to provide electrified rail services in the Cork metropolitan area, as set out in the *CMATS*. This is the largest single project proposed for inclusion in the NRRP and consists of the following works:

- Construction of a new 'through' platform within Kent Station to create a suburban rail network between Mallow, Midleton and Cobh;
- Re-signalling of the suburban rail network (62km of track); and
- Double-tracking of current single track between Glounthaune and Midleton (approximately 6 - 8km).

In line with the requirements set by the European Union for inclusion within recovery and resilience plans all works should be completed by end 2026, while it is expected that the works at Kent Station should be completed by end 2024.

I hope the Deputy can see that we are progressing with implementation of the *CMATS* and expanding sustainable mobility options in Cork city.

Question No. 71 answered with Question No. 5.

Aviation Industry

72. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Transport the position regarding and status of the chairperson of the Shannon Group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32427/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I would like to advise the Deputy that the Public Appointments Service (PAS) is carrying out a selection process for the position of Chairperson of the Board of Shannon Group. I understand that PAS will forward a shortlist of suitable candidates to me for consideration next month.

I am conscious that this is an important and challenging time for Shannon Group and I intend to appoint a new Chairperson to this key position as soon as possible thereafter.

Aviation Industry

73. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport when a new chairperson to the board of the Shannon Group will be appointed. [32119/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I would like to advise the Deputy that the Public Appointments Service (PAS) is carrying out a selection process for the position of Chairperson of the Board of Shannon Group. I understand that PAS will forward a shortlist of suitable candidates to me for consideration next month. I will make the appointment as soon as possible thereafter.

Question No. 74 answered with Question No. 52.

Bus Services

75. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to proposed changes to routes operating out of Clontarf garage as part of the proposed BusConnects plans and that the proposed rosters and schedules connected with this first phase of BusConnects represents a severe diminution of drivers existing rosters and schedules; if it is not the intention of Government or the NTA to use the BusConnects plans to introduce changes to drivers' existing rights or conditions without prior agreement; if he has or plans to meet with workers' representatives; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32211/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure in the Greater Dublin Area, including BusConnects.

With regard to the Deputy's question in relation to the impact of the proposed first phase of BusConnects on drivers existing rights and conditions, I wish to advise the Deputy that the terms and conditions of employees are a matter for the relevant companies (in this case Dublin Bus) and do not fall within my remit as Minister for Transport. I have, therefore, referred the Deputy's question to Dublin Bus for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic

76. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the implementation of the EU Covid Digital Certificate in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31925/21]

81. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Transport the preparations his Department has taken to date regarding the EU digital Covid certificate; the expected timeframe for introduction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32425/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 76 and 81 together.

Government has been clear in expressing its support for the EU Digital COVID Certificate (EUDCC) proposal and welcomes the agreement reached between the Council and European Parliament which will enable roll-out of the system and allow DCCs to begin to be issued to EU citizens in the coming weeks. I can advise the Deputy that the Department of Health in conjunction with the Department of the Taoiseach are continuing the work to ensure Ireland is in a position to comply with the EUDCC as required.

From 19 July, subject to the prevailing public health situation, Ireland will implement new arrangements for travel to Ireland based on the EU Digital COVID Certificate (DCC). A DCC will show if a passenger is vaccinated against COVID-19; has recovered from COVID-19; or has a negative test result.

Passengers arriving into Ireland from an EU/EEA Member State with a DCC will not have to undergo quarantine. However, passengers with a DCC based on a non-PCR test (for example, an antigen test), or those arriving without a DCC, will require proof of a negative RT-PCR test taken no more than 72 hours before arrival.

Children aged between 7 and 18 who have not been vaccinated must also have a negative RT-PCR test.

A passenger who has been in a non-EU/EEA country in the 14 days prior to arrival into Ireland will be subject to the rules applying to travel from that country which, in some cases, may require quarantine at a designated hotel.

All passengers will be advised to observe public health restrictions and to present for post-arrival testing if they develop symptoms of COVID-19.

It is important to note that the EU DCC is not a travel document. The possession of an EU DCC will not be a precondition to travel. Individual Member States will determine how the DCC will be used as part of national public health measures.

Furthermore, from 19 July, Ireland will also broadly align itself to the EU approach to non-essential travel into the EU from third countries (outside EU/EEA).

To protect its citizens against the importation of variants, an ‘emergency brake’ mechanism will be coordinated at EU level to react swiftly to the emergence of a variant of concern or variant of interest.

Road Projects

77. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Transport the progress being made with the R312 from Castlebar to Bellacorick; the status of the new bridge on the R312 as it passes Glenisland; if additional funding will be committed to projects on the R312 to improve road safety;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31758/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from Councils' own resources supplemented by State road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the local authority.

Mayo County Council received an allocation of €850,000 this year under the Specific Improvement Grant Programme to progress the road re-alignment and bridge replacement scheme at Glenisland on the R312. My Department understands that construction of the scheme is well advanced. To date in 2021, Mayo Council has drawdown €358,313 for this project.

As regards further projects on the R312, any projects proposed by local authorities for consideration under the Specific/Strategic Grant Programmes are assessed by the Department on a case-by-case basis. All projects put forward by local authorities for consideration must comply with the requirements of the Public Spending Code and the Department's Capital Appraisal Framework (CAF). Given the limited funding available for road improvement works it is important for local authorities to prioritise projects within their overall area of responsibility with these requirements in mind.

My Department has not received any further applications from Mayo County Council for additional specific improvements works on the R312.

Public Transport

78. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the discussions he has held with public transport operators to discuss measures to curb antisocial behaviour on public transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32460/21]

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.

The safety and security of passengers and staff, including arrangements to deal with anti-social behaviour, are matters first and foremost for the individual public transport companies in conjunction with, as appropriate, An Garda Síochána. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has also engaged with public transport operators regarding the issue of anti-social behaviour.

I have therefore forwarded the Deputy's question to the NTA, Bus Átha Cliath, Bus Éireann, Iarnród Éireann and to Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), which has contracted Transdev to operate the Luas, for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Taxi Licences

79. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Transport if he will consider implementing a moratorium on the issuing of new taxi licences for 2022 recognising the need for existing taxi drivers to resume full-time work after the pandemic. [32438/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): There is widespread awareness of the acute difficulties facing the taxi industry today. Since the pandemic started the number of li-

cenced vehicles has declined and very few people are choosing to enter the industry. In view of that reality I don't see how a moratorium would deliver any real benefit to anyone.

The Government has not exercised quantitative controls on taxi licences for nearly two decades. The consequences of such quantitative controls in the past were that passengers routinely endured lengthy queues for taxis at ranks. Dublin in particular suffered from a chronic under-supply of taxis. A moratorium on the issuance of licences would not serve the interests of those who use taxis and I do not support it. There are no plans to reintroduce such controls.

Public Transport

80. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Transport his engagements with trade unions, employees and the management of CIÉ in relation to the underfunding in the company's pension scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32417/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport in Ireland.

The CIÉ Group has two pension schemes, namely the Regular Wages Scheme ("RWS") and 1951 superannuation scheme ("1951 Scheme") and issues in relation to CIÉ pension schemes are primarily a matter for the trustees of the schemes, the CIÉ Group and their employees. Officials from my Department have regular engagement with CIÉ on matters relating to the corporate governance of the Group, including matters relating to the pension schemes.

In relation to the RWS, CIÉ has prepared and submitted draft Statutory Instruments (SIs) to give effect to the proposed changes to the scheme, and these drafts are now being considered by my Department.

Concerning the 1951 pension scheme, members of the scheme were recently balloted regarding the Labour Court Recommendation which emerged on 23rd November 2020, with a majority of the members voting to accept the proposals. CIÉ have recently written to me advising that they intend to begin the process of amending the Statutory Instruments to implement the Labour Court Recommendation. I understand that CIÉ has also advised the Pensions Authority and the '1951' Pension Scheme Trustees and Committee of this development.

Question No. 81 answered with Question No. 76.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

82. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if he has engaged with travel agents and discussed the need to provide travel agents with continuing business supports with the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment given the ongoing challenges the sector is facing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32457/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I have maintained regular contact with key stakeholders throughout the COVID crisis including representatives of the travel trade. Since the impacts of the crisis on international travel became apparent in March last year, particularly on sectors such as aviation and the outbound travel trade, officials from my Department have liaised closely with the Irish Travel Agents Association, which represents about half of the licensed travel agents in the country. My officials have also maintained close contact with travel counsellors and some of the larger tour operators in Ireland during this period. I attended a video conference with the ITAA last summer, and more

recently I joined Minister Ryan at a meeting with them in February.

The Government has provided an unprecedented package of supports to businesses during the crisis most of which have been available to the licensed travel agents and tour operators. The sector has availed of some of those central Government supports such as the Employee Wage Subsidy Scheme, which has undoubtedly helped sustain employment in the sector. Travel agents and tour operators have also qualified for the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS) or the Small Business Assistance Scheme for COVID (SBASC) which fall under the remit of my colleagues the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment respectively.

In addition, in June 2020 my Department, in close consultation with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, introduced the Refund Credit Note (RCN) Scheme. This scheme was devised in full consultation between my officials and those representing the Tánaiste's Department, with the industry as represented by the ITAA. The Scheme is in line with the EU Commission recommendations of May 2020 in assisting the liquidity positions of licensed travel agents and tour operators by ensuring that refund vouchers are protected in the event of insolvency. The Scheme has undoubtedly assisted in preserving cash within the sector. To date Notes to the value of €17m have been issued. This is money that otherwise would have had to be paid by the sector to cover customer refunds.

Furthermore, following representations from the travel trade my Department has recently liaised with merchant service providers in the context of their approach to risk profiling and requirements for security from the travel industry. The key concerns of the service providers were addressed with the cooperation of the Commission for Aviation Regulation, the body that licenses Irish travel trade firms and I am assured that the service providers have responded positively to this development.

From the outset of the pandemic I have maintained contact with relevant Government colleagues in respect to the needs of this sector, in particular from a small business perspective about the eligibility criteria for certain COVID related business support schemes. I welcomed the Tánaiste's recent announcement that eligibility for the SBASC would be extended to include travel counsellors, a cohort of travel agents that work from home.

Under the Government's Resilience and Recovery: The Path Ahead Plan, non-essential international travel will be possible from 19 July. This plan is built around the EU Digital COVID Certificates and other proofs of vaccination, pre-departure PCR testing and mandatory quarantine that will allow international travel to operate safely while an "emergency brake" mechanism will also allow us to respond to the potential emergence of variants of concern.

Whilst there will be a certain level of pent-up demand, it is recognised that it may take some time for consumer confidence to return and for the sector to see a meaningful return to trade.

On 1 June, Government launched its Economic Recovery Plan 2021 with the goal of achieving rapid job creation and economic growth after the pandemic. This plan sets out new measures for businesses and affected sectors as the economy reopens, and details for continuing existing emergency pandemic financial supports including the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), giving certainty to employers and employees. Importantly, this plan also recognises that additional support may be required for the recovery of certain sectors such as aviation and travel trade. As the travel trade is part of the wider aviation and travel ecosystem, the needs of this particular sector will continue to be considered and I and my Department will maintain contact with the industry in the weeks ahead, as we get more clarity on the trajectory of the recovery of the economy which is, of course, now finding its feet again as we start to

reopen for business.

Road Projects

83. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the progress of the Bandon southern relief road; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32405/21]

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.

The N71 Bandon Bypass extension is at early Planning & Design stage and is expected to progress to Route Selection phase in 2021.

Given TII’s role in managing the overall progression of this project, I have referred the question to TII for a more detailed and direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Public Transport

84. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Transport the way the clear public interest justification has been solicited or assessed further to his statement in response to a previous Parliamentary Question (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32423/21]

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

As indicated in my response to the Deputy on 2nd June 2021 (PQ 30156/21) - owing to the impact of Covid-19 on passenger numbers and the associated drop in fare revenue, last June the Government decided to introduce new, temporary financial support for certain licensed services provided by commercial bus operators to ensure the continued operation of these essential services.

The National Transport Authority (NTA) on behalf of my Department, entered into contracts with the licensed bus sector to provide funding for routes where a clear public interest justification supports such intervention.

Given the NTA’s statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally, I have forwarded the Deputy’s question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Airport Policy

85. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport the way he plans to restore

routes and air connectivity to Shannon Airport. [32120/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I would like to thank the Deputy for this question.

I am fully aware of the pronounced impacts of COVID-19 on Shannon Airport, like all airports in Ireland and around the world. In recognition of these impacts Government put in place a range of horizontal economy wide supports which Shannon Group is availing of as appropriate. These include both wage supports and the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS) which have recently been extended by Government.

In addition, on 10 November 2020, in recognition of the very difficult circumstances facing the aviation sector, the Government announced an €80 million funding package for Irish aviation in 2021. Shannon Airport will receive support under both the €32.1m Covid-19 Regional State Airports Programme 2021 and the €26m Covid-19 Supplementary Supports Schemes. These schemes include compensation for State Airports including Shannon Airport and will provide State airports with flexibility to roll out route incentives/charge rebates, in consultation with airlines, with a view to supporting recovery and growth of connectivity. My Department is currently assessing applications for this funding under this Scheme and would hope to be in a position to disburse this compensation in the coming weeks. In order to ensure parity of treatment, funding will be allocated to airports proportionate to the damage caused. In this regard, funding will be allocated proportionately in line with 2019 passenger numbers at the airports.

On 19th April 2021, the allocation of over €11 million in Exchequer funding was announced under the Covid-19 Regional State Airports Programme, of which €6.3m was allocated to Shannon Airport. These aviation specific supports follow the Government's approval of €6.1m to Shannon Airport in 2020 to ensure completion of the Airport's Hold Baggage Screening project.

Prior to the pandemic, Shannon Group was delivering on its commercial mandate, improving profitability and recording strong growth in its commercial property company. Shannon Group must be afforded the opportunity to return to that pre-COVID-19 value proposition and through the various supports referenced above, I believe Shannon Airport will be positioned for recovery.

I can advise the Deputy that Ryanair resumed scheduled air services in Shannon Airport on 1 June. Regarding the restoration of other routes and the introduction of new air services, these are commercial matters between airlines and airports, including Shannon Airport.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

86. **Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick** asked the Minister for Transport the cost to date of all Covid-19-related payments in his Department to individuals and corporate entities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15409/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The COVID-19 crisis has had a profound impact on public transport passenger numbers, and in turn fare revenues have dropped significantly. Public transport's designation as an essential service throughout the pandemic means that, although fare revenues have collapsed, most of the cost of operations remains and must continue to be met in order to fulfil Government's broader policy objectives.

In Budget 2020, and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately €300 million was provided for Public Service Obligation (PSO) and Local Link services. However, due to the impact that the COVID-19 crisis had on the sector, with passenger numbers falling to below

10% of 2019 levels at the height of the restrictions, a further c. €370 million was provided in 2020 to enable the continued operation of public transport services, with the COVID support scheme for commercial operators (CBO) amounting to an additional €32.3m and the Rural Transport Programme funding requirement for COVID-19 related expenditure, including for enhanced cleaning regime, additional fleet to address capacity issues and loss of fare revenue amounting to a further €0.4m. Therefore, total PSO and Local Link expenditure in 2020 was €670m compared to €300m in 2019.

A total of €2,699,376.46 was spent on COVID-19 PSO Maritime supports.

Measures to control the Coronavirus epidemic had practically stopped passenger traffic on combined Passenger/Roll-on Roll-off ferries on the Southern and Continental routes to and from Ireland. This passenger revenue is necessary for the operations' economic viability. Because of this, it became clear that urgent measures were necessary to assist in the continuation of Roll-On Roll Off freight transport on these services over the next few months.

On 7 April 2020, the Government announced the temporary designation of five strategic maritime routes into and out of Ireland as Public Service Obligation (PSO) routes during COVID-19 for a period of up to three months. These routes are Dublin/Cherbourg and Rosslare/Fishguard, Pembroke, Cherbourg and Bilbao. The Government also approved the emergency provision of a maximum contribution of €15m toward the costs involved in the continued operation of passenger ferry services on these routes in the three month period.

The five routes in question are of strategic importance to Ireland because they ensure the robustness and resilience of Ireland's lifeline supply chain which is critically important at this time for the movement of goods, including food and medical supplies, into and out of Ireland.

The Department entered into PSO Agreements with two companies to operate three of the designated routes. A final total of €2,699,376.46 was drawn down from this fund.

EU Commission Implementing Regulation 2015/1998 requires the upgrade of security screening equipment at European airports to improve explosive detection in hold baggage. To ensure compliance with this Regulation, a HBS project is currently underway at Shannon Airport.

Government approved Exchequer funding of €6.1 million in June 2020 to assist in the completion of this project at Shannon Airport, which had been suspended due to the impacts of COVID. Of the Exchequer funds available, €303K was drawn down in 2020 and a further €2.47 million has been drawn down to date in 2021. The balance of funds are expected to be drawn down upon completion of the project by years end.

The total COVID related spend in the Marine Survey Office (MSO) of my Department was just over €9, 000. This was primarily spent on personal protective equipment (PPE). Procurement of the additional PPE assisted the MSO to continue providing statutory services during the COVID restrictions.

The provision of antigen testing services for commercial vehicle drivers travelling to certain other EU countries amounted to €1,264,500 and self-isolation accommodation for non-resident drivers that tested positive for COVID-19 amounted to €84,000.

In 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic the Irish Coast Guard spent in the region of €190,000. This included spend on PPE (FFP2, surgical and barrier type facemasks, gloves, tychem & tyvek suits), hand sanitiser, disinfectant, supply and fitting of vehicle partitions, thermometers, posters/signage, automatic hand sanitiser dispensers, and mobile handwashing basins. The spend to date in 2021 is being compiled at present, and will be furnished to the

Deputy without delay.

The Department allocated €1.9m for payments for overseas travel repatriation and refund. The funds are administered by the Commission for Aviation Regulation.

My Department facilitated the initial setting up by daa of a call centre in relation to the passenger locator forms under the responsibility of the Department of Health. The €45,843.15 paid involved payment of the cost of legal advice.

A total sum of €3,315.46 (inclusive of VAT) was spent by my Department relating to COVID-19 communications to the public. This was for the provision of information leaflets for distribution, over the Christmas travel period, to passengers on board ferries to Ireland and also to passengers on arrival in Irish airports, to advise them of COVID-19 requirements in this country at the time. This sum included a small sum for the translation of the leaflet into Irish.

My Department also spent €503,451.78 on IT related equipment, Health and Safety measures, PPE, signage and other COVID-19 related items.

Bus Services

87. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport the plans in place to install new bus shelters in County Cork in the next year. [32409/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure, including the provision of bus stops and shelters.

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

Greenways Provision

88. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the Programme for Government commitment to develop coastal greenways and off road cycle routes, such as the East Coast Greenway. [32455/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department is working with local authorities and appropriate agencies to continue developing an integrated national network of greenways to be used by commuters, students, leisure cyclists and tourists and to support cross-border greenway projects.

Transport Infrastructure Ireland will be commencing work on a National Cycle Network this year and is due to finish this work in 2022. This Network will comprise Greenways, other off road cycle routes, lower trafficked roads, and will build on the work of the National Transport Authority (NTA) in the GDA Cycle Network Plan and the Regional Cities Cycle Network plans.

Under the Strategy for the Future Development of Regional and Local Greenways, €40m was invested by the previous Government in 2019 to co-fund nine construction-ready Greenways. This co-funding was significantly increased following my appointment as Minister in

17 June 2021

2020 to one hundred per cent Exchequer funding with a total allocation to these projects of €76m. The total allocation for Greenways in 2021 is over €63m which is the highest single year figure for Greenways by some margin.

My Department has continued to co-support cross-border Greenways under the EU Interreg V programme, including the Carlingford to Newry Greenway on the East Coast.

In 2020 my Department allocated €4.5m in co-funding for 26 pre-construction phase projects, including Preliminary Design and Environmental Evaluation for a 12.3 km section from the Tourist Office in Carlingford to Templetown Beach. This will provide us with a pipeline of projects that will come to construction over the coming years and see us achieve the goal set out in the Greenways Strategy of increasing the number and geographical spread of Greenways around the country.

In relation to planned routes outlined in the Greater Dublin Area Cycle Network Plan that would potentially form part of the East Coast Greenway, this document was prepared in 2013 by the NTA and I will therefore refer the Deputy's query to the NTA for a more detailed reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

My Department will continue to work with stakeholders and other government departments to deliver on cycling infrastructure commitments in the Programme for Government.

Road Projects

89. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Transport if the Limerick northern distributor road continues to be considered a key infrastructure project that will be progressed as a priority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32424/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority, in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from local authorities' own resources supplemented by State road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the local authority.

The National Development Plan (NDP) as it stands, does provide for the gradual build up in funding for the road network but funding is not yet at the level needed for the adequate maintenance and renewal of regional and local roads. For this reason, the primary focus for capital investment continues to be the maintenance and renewal of the network with some limited investment in road improvement schemes.

Under the National Development Plan there is no Exchequer regional and local road grant funding in place to progress the Limerick Northern Distributor Road through the planning process to construction stage.

Question No. 90 answered with Question No. 27.

Covid-19 Pandemic

91. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the use of Covid-19 antigen testing as part of efforts to support the Irish aviation industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32410/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The use of antigen testing in relation to international travel is a matter for the Minister for Health in the first instance. Government decisions relating to COVID-19 testing are based on public health advice.

Question No. 92 answered with Question No. 23.

Transport Policy

93. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Transport if he is satisfied that the potential to develop shared use of motor vehicles and bikes is being adequately facilitated in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31582/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I agree with the Deputy that there is a role for shared use of motor vehicles and bikes as we seek to achieve a fundamental change in the nature of transport in Ireland.

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

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

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

Following the public consultation, my Department is now developing a new 10-year Sustainable Mobility Policy which will be published later this year. The aim is to put in place a new policy that better supports sustainable mobility and a shift away from the private car to greater use of active travel and public transport. Shared mobility has a role to play in changing how we think about our daily travel and facilitating that change.

Aviation Industry

94. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Transport the impact of recent aviation decisions on regional connectivity; the measures in place to safeguard connectivity especially at regional airports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32454/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The sudden announcement by Stobart Air last weekend had an immediate impact on regional connectivity, in particular on PSO flights between Dublin and the airports of Donegal and Kerry. In that regard, my priority is to restore this connectivity as soon as possible through an emergency

procurement process with a view to services being operational again by mid July.

This restoration of regional connectivity is of critical importance to Government. The funding which has been made available to Airports is a clear indication of this. In addition to the economy-wide measures made available to all businesses, Government is also implementing an €80m funding package specifically for Irish aviation. In addition to €21.3m in funding to support connectivity to the airports of Donegal, Kerry and Ireland West under the Regional Airports Programme, €32.1m in funding has also been made available to Cork and Shannon airports under a Covid-19 Regional State Airports Programme 2021.

Furthermore, on 24 February, the Commission approved State aid support schemes to help address liquidity issues at airports as a result of Covid-19. The airports that will benefit from potential supports are Dublin, Cork, Shannon, Ireland West, Kerry and Donegal. Collectively, these new Covid-19 Supplementary Supports Schemes have a budget of €26m.

These schemes include compensation for State airports (Dublin, Cork and Shannon) of approximately €20m, in light of Covid impacts in 2020. This funding will provide State airports with flexibility to roll out route incentives/charge rebates, in consultation with airlines, with a view to supporting recovery and growth of connectivity.

In addition, up to €6m will also be available to regional airports that provide connectivity (Ireland West, Kerry and Donegal) under the EU Temporary Framework in recognition of the impact of COVID on their business.

Applications for funding under these schemes are also currently being assessed and it is hoped that aid will be granted in the coming weeks.

The Government announcement on 26 May of a roadmap for the gradual reopening of international travel from 19 July will also help to safeguard connectivity at our regional airports.

I am pleased to advise that scheduled commercial air services are now resuming at all our regional airports with scheduled flights now operating out of Cork, Shannon and Kerry and resuming at Ireland West from Friday. I also understand that Donegal airport expects Glasgow flights to resume next month.

Rail Network

95. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport the position regarding and if a copy will be provided of the detailed design works in relation to MetroLink as it relates to Estuary Court, Chapel Lane, and Ashely Estate in Swords, County Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31504/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy is probably aware, the current status of the MetroLink project is that a Preliminary Business Case has been prepared by Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) and submitted by the NTA to my Department for review as is required under the *Public Spending Code*. Subject to Government approval and the completion of all necessary planning / environmental documentation, the scheme will then be submitted to An Bord Pleanála for planning approval, known as a Railway Order.

The Preliminary Business Case has been prepared on the basis of the Preferred Route for the scheme as has evolved during public consultations over 2018 and 2019 and which is available to view on the dedicated project website, www.metrolink.ie.

I am informed that in relation to the specific issue referred to by the Deputy that TII continues to have on-going engagement with residents in this area. The detailed design and relevant surveys will be published as part of the Environmental Impact Assessment Report which will form part of the Railway Order application for MetroLink. Obviously, all interested parties will be able to make their views known as part of that Railway Order application process.

Rail Network

96. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Transport the status of and position regarding the daily intermodal freight train from Ballina to Dublin Port; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32444/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I understand that due to the significant increases in LoLo shipping services direct from Dublin Port to the continent, there have been some capacity constraints at one of the privately run terminals in Dublin port that caters to both LoLo and rail freight. As a result, this has impacted on rail freight services into the Port.

It is understood that the stakeholders involved, Doyle Shipping Group, its client IWT, Iarnród Éireann and Dublin Port are currently engaging to explore how to resolve these issues. I encourage all parties to constructively engage to ensure the continuation of rail freight into Dublin Port.

Road Projects

97. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the A5 motorway project; and when the work is set to commence. [31887/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The planning and implementation of the proposed A5 upgrade project is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland authorities.

Following a Public Inquiry into the scheme in early 2020, the Department for Infrastructure received an Interim Report from the Planning Appeals Commission (PAC) in September 2020. After careful consideration and having taken legal advice, the Minister for Infrastructure published the Interim Report together with her Department's formal response to all the recommendations made by the PAC in the form of an Interim Departmental Statement issued on 16th March 2021.

The Minister for Infrastructure has indicated that she expects the Public Inquiry to be reconvened in early 2022, with a view to the Commission preparing a final report on the scheme.

The funding arrangements in relation to the A5 are governed by the commitments in the Stormont House Agreement and Implementation Plan - A Fresh Start and in the New Decade, New Approach document. The Government is committed to providing funding of £75 million (sterling) towards the cost of phase 1a of the A5 upgrade scheme once the statutory planning process in Northern Ireland has been concluded.

Question No. 98 answered with Question No. 13.

Questions Nos. 99 to 102, inclusive, answered orally.

Public Sector Pay

103. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to unwind professional fee cuts that were imposed on barristers during the period 2008-2011 who are instructed to prosecute criminal cases on behalf of the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32469/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): Thank you Deputy for this question. To provide some background to this issue, you will be aware that counsel fees were reduced in both 2009 and 2010 respectively as part of a broader Government agenda to reduce escalating legal costs. A further reduction was imposed in 2011 primarily to control spending under the Criminal Legal Aid Scheme. These reductions 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.

Questions Nos. 104 to 108, inclusive, answered orally.

Pension Provisions

109. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he plans to review the provisions of the Public Service Pensions (Single Scheme and Other Provisions) Act 2012. [32331/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Public Service Pensions (Single Scheme and Other Provisions) Act 2012 (the 2012 Act), represents the delivery of a key structural reform measure.

Among other things, the 2012 Act provided for the creation of the Single Public Service Pension Scheme (Single Scheme), the extension of pension abatement across the public service and the extension of the 40 years' (or equivalent) pensionable service cap across all public service pension schemes.

The Single Scheme, established under the 2012 Act, is the default pension scheme for all new entrants to the public service since 1 January 2013. It represents the largest ever reform to public service pensions and remains critical to addressing the long-term sustainability of public service pensions in the face of significant demographic challenges over the coming decades. The Single Scheme will be instrumental in stemming the future growth in expenditure on public service pensions by driving estimated savings of up to 35% over the long-term, as compared to the cost if all new entrants were granted membership of the pre-2013 public service pension schemes.

At the end of 2013, there were 12,800 active members of the Single Scheme. By the end of 2020 there were 166,000 Single Scheme members, representing an average annual increase in membership of over 20,000 since 2013. It is possible that Single Scheme membership could exceed 200,000 by 2025, given current levels of recruitment. As pre-2013 public servants resign or retire, they will continue to be replaced by Single Scheme members. Single Scheme members are likely to form the majority of public service pensioners by the second half of the century.

Given the key importance to the long-term stability and sustainability of the public finances of the Single Scheme, as provided for under the provisions of the 2012 Act, I have no plans to revisit those provisions. The operation of the Single Scheme is, of course, subject to ongoing monitoring by my Department.

Questions Nos. 110 and 111 answered orally.

Question No. 112 answered with Question No. 105.

Programme for Government

113. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the steps he is taking to fulfil the Programme for Government commitment to direct a proportion of the proceeds of the carbon tax towards climate focused measures in the agri-food sector. [32352/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Programme for Government recognises the special economic and social role that agriculture plays in Ireland, but also commits to the creation of schemes that will encourage and incentivise farmers to farm in a greener and more sustainable way. This is with the aim of developing a sustainable Irish agricultural sector that protects the environment and aligns with emerging consumer sentiment, while benefiting farmers and rural communities.

The Programme for Government commits to the allocation of €1.5bn in projected carbon tax receipts over the next ten years for this purpose. This allocation to a new agri environment programme will help to encourage and incentivise farmers to farm in a greener and more sustainable way. The first step in meeting this commitment was in Budget 2021 through the allocation of €20m in anticipated additional carbon tax receipts for the creation of pilot environmental programmes. This was supplemented with the continuation of the €3m in funding that was provided for agricultural programmes from carbon tax receipts in 2020, bringing the total funding for carbon tax supported measures in the agricultural sector to €23m in 2021.

These funds are being used to create and operate the Results Based Environment Agri Pilot Programme or REAP scheme. Farmers in this scheme will be rewarded for their committed environmental effort and the delivery of environmental benefits including improving biodiversity, water quality, soil health, and sequestering carbon. Payments will be linked to the quality of environmental outcomes delivered. It is expected that the REAP scheme will help to inform the development of future agri environment schemes.

The use of carbon funds in 2021 was detailed in the Budget Day publication “The Use of Carbon Tax Funds 2021” which continues to be available on the budget.gov.ie website. Carbon tax funding in the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine is allocated to a specific sub-head, B.13, against which progress on spending the allocated funds can be tracked.

Questions regarding the operational details of the REAP scheme should be directed to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and Marine.

Public Sector Staff

114. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the lessons he has learned in the course of the pandemic with regard to maintaining staffing levels in key areas of the public sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31412/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): In the period 2014 to 2019 there was increased expenditure on public services and infrastructure, with steady increases in current expenditure underpinned by sustainable increases in revenue, and significant growth in capital investment reflecting the reductions over the period 2008 to 2014 and the importance of capital investment in delivering on social and economic objectives. This sustainable level of overall expenditure growth has provided investment in our public services, particularly in the key frontline areas of Health, Education, Housing and Childcare, while at the same time bringing the General Government Balance from a deficit of 3.6% of GDP in 2014 to a surplus of 0.5% of GDP in 2019. This left the public finances in a stronger position as we faced into the crisis caused by Covid-19.

Over this period, this increased expenditure has allowed for increased staffing in key frontline areas, with staffing in the Health sector increasing by 18% and in the Education sector by 17% when comparing Quarter 4 2014 with Quarter 4 2019.

In 2020, numbers in the Health sector increased to 124,816, a 4% increase over end-2019 and in the Education sectors, overall numbers increased by 3% to 113,336 in the same period. This demonstrates the ongoing commitment to allocate funding for recruitment of staff in order to provide vital frontline service provision to respond to Covid-19.

In addition to making available €12 billion in funding for Covid and Brexit related measures, Budget 2021 also provided an increase of 6.2% for core current expenditure programmes. The pandemic has demonstrated how much we rely upon our health service. In addition to providing for Covid-19 related funding, core current expenditure in the Department of Health was increased by 10.7% in Budget 2021. As outlined in Expenditure Report 2021, this Health allocation will fund an increase of approximately 16,000 posts in the health sector above the pre-Covid funded levels for 2020.

The approach being adopted in relation to overall expenditure is to ensure that the growth in expenditure on public services is sustainable over the medium term. This will allow for additional staffing resources to be allocated to meet the demands for public services over the coming years.

Civil Service

115. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his role in setting the salary level for the Secretary General of the Department of Health; if he is satisfied that the new salary is justified; and if he has concerns that the increase in salary for this position will lead to further pay claims in other Departments. [32040/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): As Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, I have statutory responsibility for the terms and conditions of service, including remuneration, of civil servants, as set out in the Civil Service Regulation Acts.

In meeting these responsibilities as regards the terms to apply for recruitment to the post of

Secretary General in the Department of Health, I engaged with the Taoiseach, the Minister for Health and the Secretary General to the Government.

In that context, I took account of a number of factors, including that the post is a highly complex one with a very challenging brief, particularly so in the midst of a global pandemic. There are very significant responsibilities attached to this role including: the ongoing management of the response to the COVID public health emergency; implementing the Government's ambition for the rollout of Sláintecare; and the management of the greatly increased budget of €22 billion for Health in 2021.

Reflecting these, I consider that a salary of €292,000 is commensurate with the scale of the responsibilities and the unique challenges attached to this role, not least at the current time.

There are no changes to pay rates for other Secretary General posts, and I do not envisage this decision resulting in any change in relation to general pay policy at senior level.

As the deputy may be aware, I have previously provided information relating to my responsibilities regarding this matter in the context of my statement and appearance before the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform, and Taoiseach on 2nd February last.

Documents related to the matter have also been published by my Department, and are available on the Department's webpage.

Departmental Policies

116. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he plans to engage with trade union representatives advocating a four-day working week; if he will consider such a proposal for the civil and public sectors; if he has examined similar proposals in other jurisdictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32214/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The matter of a four day working week has been raised by the Four Day Week Ireland campaign led by Forsa, ICTU and other civil society groups. Correspondence on this issue has been received in my Department and I note that the campaign has engaged with the Tanáiste on their proposals.

In the context of the civil and public service, there are two main concerns in considering a move to a four day week - the cost to the taxpayer and ensuring the continuity of services to the public.

On the issue of costs, there are potentially significant costs associated with a move to a four day week in the public service. Significant additional recruitment would be required in order to ensure the continued delivery of essential public services, in particular in terms of frontline and emergency public services that must be available on a seven day basis.

A comprehensive analysis of the potential costs involved would involve a high degree of complexity, as it would encompass over 342,000 public servants in nearly 200 organisations. At a very high level, paying people for four days but providing services to the citizen over five and in some cases seven days would add at least a fifth to the current pay bill of approximately €21bn. That equates to an extra €4.2bn that would have to be found to deliver the same level of services. This is likely a conservative estimate, given the premiums associated with overtime and agency staffing, which would likely be required.

In addition, maintaining the accessibility of services to citizens would be a huge challenge.

For example, would there be sufficient time in four days to teach our children properly? What would happen to childcare costs if the public service moved but parts of the private sector did not? And how would the emergency services - hospitals, fire brigades, lifeguards and the Gardaí - operate on a four day week?

These are essential public services, the importance of which has been underlined by the Covid-19 pandemic. The wider implications of this proposal also need to be carefully considered for the entire labour force, not just the public service. Indeed any movement by the public service in isolation could have serious consequences for, in particular, small to medium businesses already struggling in the face of Covid-19.

I would also like to make the point that the State is already a good employer that offers considerable flexibility to staff through the availability of, amongst other things, work sharing, flexible working hours, shorter working years, career breaks and now remote working. At this time, work is underway on developing a framework for 'blended' working, which is a priority area for my Department.

In my role as Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform I have to ensure that quality public services are delivered to the Irish people in a manner that delivers value for money to the Irish taxpayer.

With this in mind, and in light of the large potential costs and disruption to critical services I do not believe that it is the right time to consider a transition to a four day week.

Public Services Provision

117. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the work his Department has undertaken to date to deliver on the plain language requirement on all public service communication as referenced in the Programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32344/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): As the Deputy may be aware, my Department is currently developing the next phase of public service reform, to follow on from Our Public Service 2020 (OPS2020)- the development and innovation framework for the Public Service. It is in this context that we are considering how to best progress the Programme for Government commitment to "*(I)ntroduce a plain language requirement on all public service communication so people can understand information the first time they read or hear it.*"

The next phase of public service reform will address the plain language requirement by building on the achievements of OPS2020 Action 2 'Improve Services for our customers' and Action 3 'Make Services More Accessible to All'. These include:

- Promotion of the Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service. The toolkit was prepared by the Quality Customer Service Network (QCSN), which my Department leads on under Our Public Service, in collaboration with the Centre for Excellence in Universal Design at the NDA. This toolkit received the 2019 National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) Award for best use of plain English by an organisation. The toolkit is used extensively across the Public Service as a key reference tool.

- The Toolkit complements the **Plain English Style Guide for the Public Service**, which was developed by DPER in collaboration with NALA, which is also available on the OPS website.

The Reform Delivery Office, in my Department, which is responsible for delivering OPS is furthermore responsible for driving the Quality Customer Service Initiative (QCSI). The QCSI sets out 12 Guiding Principles of Quality Customer Service. Principles 2: Equality/Diversity; 3: Physical Access; and, 4: Information; relate to making services more accessible to all, and have been a key part of the work programme of the Quality Customer Service Network (QCSN) since its establishment in 2000. Progressing Guiding Principle No 4, 'Information' is of particular relevance and focuses on taking a "proactive approach in providing information that is clear, timely and accurate, is available at all points of contact, and meets the requirements of people with specific needs"

Promotion of the QCSI principles, the Customer Communications Toolkit for the Public Service and the **Plain English Style Guide for the Public Service** is undertaken through the public service-wide Quality Customer Service Network (meets quarterly, membership of over 130 Public Service Organisations) and the OPS website.

Freedom of Information

118. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to enhance freedom of information legislation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32343/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): It is important to acknowledge from the outset that by any objective measure the Freedom of Information system as it stands appears to be operating effectively and delivering on its goal of openness, transparency and accountability for public bodies.

The volume of requests processed annually by public bodies has almost doubled since the introduction of the 2014 Freedom of Information Act. In 2019, the last year for which statistics are available, FOI bodies in Ireland processed 41,176 requests, once more setting a record for the greatest number of requests processed annually, and representing an increase of 8% on the previous year. 87% of the requests that were decided on in 2019 were granted in full or in part.

In addition, it should be noted in any given year approximately 60% of requests are from the general public for personal information relating to them, such as medical or social welfare files. No fee applies to this class of request at any stage, and in most years such requests tend to be fully granted in well over 90% of cases. Comprehensive review mechanisms are available under the Freedom of Information Act where a requester is dissatisfied with the decision they receive. It is noteworthy that, in 2019, only 3% of requesters sought an internal review of an FOI decision, while just 1% of requesters went on to apply for an independent review with the Office of the Information Commissioner.

However, while objective indications are that the system as it stands is robust and functioning well, that is not to say that it could not be further improved. Given that almost 7 years have passed since the enactment of the 2014 Act, I believe that a review of the legislation would now be timely.

I believe there is scope for a careful and thorough appraisal of the system as it stands, as well as a wide-ranging consideration of where we might go from here. Submissions will be sought in due course from stakeholders across the system, in particular from the general public. I look forward to considering any observations the Deputy might wish to make as the review progresses.

Houses of the Oireachtas Commission

119. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the changes that will be made to the scheme for secretarial assistants in the Houses of the Oireachtas to recognise the evolution of the secretarial assistant role in Dáil Éireann and Seanad Éireann; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31919/21]

161. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the reason for the below living wage starting salary for secretarial assistants under the scheme for secretarial assistants in the Houses of the Oireachtas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31918/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I propose to take Questions Nos. 119 and 161 together.

The Houses of the Oireachtas Commission is responsible for the salaries of staff employed under the Secretarial Assistance Scheme who provide administrative support to Members of the Oireachtas.

The Deputy will be aware that SIPTU has been engaging with the Commission in relation to the terms and conditions of its members who are political support staff of Oireachtas Members. The staff in question are employed in the Houses of the Oireachtas by individual TDs and Senators.

A conciliation conference took place in April 2021 at the WRC and this process remains available to the parties to seek resolution of the issues between them.

The Houses of the Oireachtas Commission Act, 2003 requires the Commission, in relation to secretarial facilities, to obtain my consent before reaching an agreement with any person in relation to conditions of employment.

National Children's Hospital

120. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the monitoring mechanisms employed by his Department regarding the costs associated with the national children's hospital; and the final estimated cost of this project. [32041/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Minister for Health and his Department have oversight responsibility in relation to the National Children's Hospital. I understand that the Minister for Health is in the process of preparing an update on this matter for Government.

Covid-19 Pandemic

121. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the details of the proposed work placement experience programme as cited in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan; his plans to ensure that participants of the programme are appropriately remunerated under the proposed scheme; if he will engage with a union (details supplied) on the design and governance of the programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32346/21]

122. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the key measures under Priority 1 of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan; and if he will

make a statement on the matter. [32208/21]

150. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the way in which the National Recovery and Resilience Plan which he published in May 2021 will help in Ireland's just transition; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32339/21]

157. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of Ireland's National Recovery and Resilience Plan submitted to the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31970/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I propose to take Questions Nos. 121, 122, 150 and 157 together.

On 28 May 2021 Ireland's draft National Recovery and Resilience Plan was approved by the Government and submitted to the European Commission. It will now be assessed by the Commission which will, within two months, make a recommendation to the Council of the European Union, on the basis of which implementation of the Plan will commence and EU financial support will start to flow.

On 1 June 2021 I published an overview of the draft Plan setting out details of the sixteen investment projects and nine reform measures it contains. Individual Ministers across Government will be responsible for the different investments.

The overall objective of the NRRP is to contribute to a sustainable, equitable, green and digital recovery, in a manner that complements and supports the Government's broader recovery efforts.

Reflecting the requirements of the EU's Recovery and Resilience Facility, Ireland's Plan has a particular focus on green and digital transition, as well as supporting economic recovery and job creation.

The NRRP is aligned with the Government's Economic Recovery Plan and has been developed, in particular insofar as identification of investments is concerned, alongside the ongoing review of the National Development Plan.

The Plan has a total value of around €1 billion and includes a suite of projects and measures under three priority headings.

Reflecting our strong national commitment to addressing the climate and biodiversity crisis, Priority 1 sees investments with a total value of €531 million to address the green transition.

The importance of the digital transition for Ireland and Europe in the coming decade is reflected in Priority 2 which includes projects with a total value of €295 million aimed at accelerating and expanding digital reforms and transformation.

Finally, Priority 3 has a total value of €181 million and includes projects and measures to tackle social and economic recovery and job creation with a strong focus on supporting people's return to work and preparing for the challenges of the future, including the work placement experience programme mentioned by Deputy Nash which is being advanced by my colleague the Minister for Social Protection.

EU Directives

123. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform

the analysis his Department has carried out into the question of ensuring that local elected representatives will be covered by protections for whistleblowers under the forthcoming legislation transposing the EU whistleblowing directive into law; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32126/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): Directive (EU) 2019/1937 on the protection of persons who report breaches of Union law (“the Whistleblowing Directive”) was adopted in October 2019 and Ireland has until 17 December 2021 to transpose it into Irish law. Ireland already has comprehensive whistleblower protection legislation in place in the form of the Protected Disclosures Act 2014. Transposition of the Directive will require amendments to the 2014 Act.

In this regard, on 12 May 2021, following approval from Government, I published the General Scheme of a Bill to amend the Protected Disclosures Act to give effect to the Directive. My officials are now working with officials in the Office of the Attorney General on the drafting of the Bill. The General Scheme has also been referred to the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform and Taoiseach for pre-legislative scrutiny. In this regard, the Committee held a preliminary hearing with representatives from Transparency International Ireland, academia and the media on 27 May.

The Protected Disclosures Act already provides protections from retaliation for workers in the public and private sectors who speak up about wrongdoing in the workplace. The proposals I have set out in the General Scheme will - in accordance with the requirements of the Directive - provide for the extension of the personal scope of the Act to volunteers and also shareholders, board members and job applicants.

The question the Deputy raises as to the application of the Directive to local elected representatives is a legally complex matter and I have referred it to the Attorney General for his views. I await his reply, which then feed into consideration of this matter during the drafting process.

Office of Public Works

124. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the Office of Public Works has any plans for the refurbishment of Naas Courthouse; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32338/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): While the OPW has no responsibility for Court buildings, it does provide technical and other services on request to the Courts Service in relation to its buildings.

The OPW has not been requested by the Courts Service to carry out any refurbishment of Naas Courthouse.

The OPW carries out capital works, reactive and planned maintenance works as requested by the Courts Service. The OPW has no knowledge of any future refurbishment works planned for Naas Courthouse.

Defective Building Materials

125. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the fines or sanctions that are issued to those involved in providing and building with defective

concrete blocks to assist in funding the grant schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31922/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The remediation schemes arising from the use of defective concrete blocks come under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The management and administration of the schemes are therefore a matter for that Department.

Office of Public Works

126. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the progress of the Office of Public Works refurbishment of Carlow courthouse railings. [32330/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The Office of Public Works Heritage Services Division has recently received a number of tenders for the repair of the railings at Carlow Courthouse and the design team is currently in the process of assessing them.

The project Quantity Surveyor is reviewing the preferred tenderer's price in detail.

There is an expectation that the Quantity Surveyor will issue his report very shortly for consideration.

If in order, the senior architect assigned to this project will directly discuss programme and other issues with the preferred tenderer. This will occur in advance of the Commissioners placing the contract with them for the execution of the works.

Northern Ireland

127. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will be moving to avail of the PEACE PLUS funding to promote North-South co-operation; the European funds that are currently being targeted; the reason; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32467/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Irish Government has advocated strongly for a new EU-funded cooperation programme between Ireland and Northern Ireland for the 2021-2027 EU programming period.

I am very pleased that such a programme has been secured. The new PEACE PLUS programme will combine and build on the current North South cross border cooperation programmes, PEACE IV and INTERREG VA., and will aim to build peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland.

As for other programmes in the EU family of cross-border cooperation programmes, PEACE PLUS will be funded by the European Regional Development programme, under its European Territorial Cooperation objective. Funding contributions will come from the EU, the Irish Government, the UK Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. While the funding quantum is not fully finalised, it is likely to be in the region of €1 billion.

This new programme will cover an eligible area of Northern Ireland and Counties Cavan, Donegal, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan and Sligo. However, I would note that there are also op-

opportunities for cooperation beyond this programme area.

The development process for PEACE PLUS has been led by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB), the North South Implementation Body which administers the current PEACE and INTERREG cross-border EU programmes. SEUPB has worked closely with my Department and with the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland and is also being supported by a cross-sectoral Programme Development Steering Group. SEUPB has been engaged in extensive preparation work for PEACE PLUS since 2019, including engagement with government departments North and South as well as public consultation.

On foot of this development work, SEUPB has prepared a draft PEACE PLUS programme with six themes:

- Building Peaceful and Thriving Communities
- Delivering Economic Regeneration and Transformation
- Empowering and Investing in Our Young People
- Healthy and Inclusive Communities
- Supporting a Sustainable Future;
- Building and Embedding Partnership and Collaboration.

Public consultation on the draft programme concluded on 12 May 2021, and the SEUPB is currently preparing a final draft which will be brought to the Government and the Northern Ireland Executive before submission to the European Commission.

Departmental Circulars

128. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the promotion of the green and social procurement agenda; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32345/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): In 2019, my Department published Circular 20/2019: Promoting the use of Environmental and Social Considerations in Public Procurement. The Circular instructs Departments to consider including green criteria in public procurement processes where:

- Clearly defined, quantifiable, verifiable, and measurable criteria have been developed by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC), and are relevant to the specific procurement process, and

- The cost can be met within a Department's existing budget, without impacting on service delivery

Defined, quantifiable, verifiable, and measurable criteria for a number of products and services have been developed by the Environmental Protection Agency under the auspices of DECC and are available in 'Green Procurement - Guidance for the Public Sector', which can be downloaded from gov.ie. These criteria are being updated and new criteria, for a broader range of areas, is expected to be published in 2021. Further guidance on the inclusion of both green and social criteria in public procurement can be found in the Information Note on Incorporating Social Considerations into Public Procurement published by the Office of Government Procure-

ment (OGP) in 2018.

Circular 20/2019 also requires public bodies to incorporate relevant green procurement measures into their planning and reporting cycles. The Environmental Protection Agency was requested by DECC to produce a Reporting and Monitoring template for Green Public Procurement with reports for 2020 due for return in March 2021. I understand the EPA is currently assessing these reports for 2020.

The OGP considers green and social criteria in the development of its solutions on a case by case basis having regard to all relevant factors including marketplace capabilities. In developing solutions, the OGP relies on the support and involvement of the users and policy departments to define their requirements. All OGP solutions meet the necessary minimum standards, legislation, codes of practice and industry standards. In addition, the OGP has included green and social considerations in a range of its solutions, for example, electric vehicles, paper, electricity, confidential shredding and catering supplies.

In addition, Circular 20/2019 draws the attention of Departments to the cross-departmental Social Considerations Advisory Group, which aims to promote and facilitate the incorporation of social considerations, including environmental considerations, into public procurement projects. This group was established by the OGP, and brings together officials from policy departments with public procurement practitioners to share best practice in relevant fields. To align the objectives of the group with Programme for Government commitments, new Terms of Reference were developed in September 2020, and the group has been renamed as the Strategic Procurement Advisory Group (SPAG). This year, the OGP and DECC jointly established an environmental subgroup of the SPAG. This subgroup facilitates more detailed, technical, discussion of approaches to incorporate environmental considerations into procurement.

Furthermore, my officials present at a range of public sector events and seminars to promote the green and social public procurement agenda and will continue to promote utilising the State's purchasing power to deliver on our commitments to sustainable development and social inclusion. Green and social procurement considerations are also discussed with the key business representative bodies at the SME Advisory Group meeting which is chaired by my colleague, Minister of State Ossian Smyth.

Office of Public Works

129. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans for the retrofit of public office accommodation. [32340/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The Public Sector Retrofit Pathfinder Project at Tom Johnson House, being undertaken by the Office of Public Works (OPW) is one of its major capital projects. I am pleased to note the inclusion of this project within Ireland's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP) 2021.

The National Recovery and Resilience Plan recently published by the Government identifies advancing the green transition as a top priority and allocates significant funding towards decarbonising projects such as the retrofitting of public office accommodation. The OPW is deeply committed to helping advance sustainable solutions that mitigate against climate change, including through the new Public Sector Retrofit Pathfinder Project as well as through a Public Service Innovation Fund project, which will develop guidelines for the deep energy renovation of historic public sector properties.

The Public Sector Retrofit Pathfinder Project at Tom Johnson House, located in Beggars Bush Dublin 4, will involve a significant refurbishment of this five storey over basement office building that was constructed circa 1975. This energy efficient project will be an exemplar of a ‘deep retrofit’ refurbishment project and will represent the OPW as a leader in the transition to a sustainable, low-carbon, resource-efficient economy.

The works will consist of a significant upgrade to the building thermal fabric and overall energy use – that will upgrade the Building Energy Rating (BER) from a C3 rating to an A2 rating, resulting in a 75% reduction of annual energy use. The project is currently out to tender and it is anticipated that the construction will start in Q4 2021 with a 21 month construction period.

When the proposed works are complete, the building, which is currently occupied by the Labour Relations Commission and the Geological Survey of Ireland, will become the new headquarters of the Department of Environment, Climate & Communications (DECC). The overall policy for retrofitting buildings across the entire public sector rests with the DECC.

Flood Risk Management

130. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of and position regarding a number of tranche one schemes within the Eastern Flood Risk Management Plans specifically, Loughlinstown, Deansgrange and the Old Connaught / Wilford flood schemes. [32484/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O’Donovan): Thank you Deputy for your question in relation to the ‘Tranche One’ schemes located in South County Dublin. The following is the current status of the schemes referred to in your PQ:

Loughlinstown (Carrickmines/Shanganagh):

Engineering and Environmental Consultants have been appointed for the project and they are currently gathering data to assist with modelling of extreme river flows in the catchment. In particular a flow and rainfall survey and a detailed topographical survey have just been completed. Initial environmental surveys are underway as well as an initial assessment of benefits that any future scheme may provide. It is planned to carry out an initial public consultation day in July to gather information about past flood events and consult the public about the types and areas where flood alleviation measures may be required. A dedicated website has been launched for the project (www.csfrs.ie). This contains detailed information on the projects’ progress and is updated regularly.

Loughlinstown (Deansgrange):

The Deansgrange Flood Relief Scheme is well underway. The appointed Engineering and Environmental consultants, JBA and JB Barry, have completed the initial data collection phase of the Project (topographical surveys, environmental surveys etc.) and are currently modelling flood alleviation options that will protect the many properties at risk, particularly in the Bay-view/Seafield environs. To assist with the design of the preferred options, a detailed ground investigation has recently commenced.

An initial public engagement event took place in Q3 2020. When a cost beneficial alleviation option is identified there will be another public engagement event, this is likely to take place in Q4 2021.

As part of the project, an advance contract was awarded to construct a flood storage structure in Kilbogget Park. This structure will restrict flow in the river and store flood waters safely in the wetland area of the park and slowly release this flood water downstream as a severe rainfall event passes. This project is now substantially complete and will assist in providing protection to many, but not all, properties downstream. A dedicated website has been launched for the project which will be regularly updated: www.deansgrangefrs.ie

Old Connaught Road/Wilford Scheme:

The Old Connaught Road/Wilford Scheme, while included in the Flood Risk Management Plans launched in 2018, was not one of the initial 60 new flood relief schemes to be progressed under the Capital Flood Relief Programme and work is not yet planned at this time for Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown County Council, who will be the lead Authority for this Scheme, to progress works there. The Old Connaught/Wilford Scheme will be progressed as part of the next tranche of projects that attract funding from the OPW.

Work was carried out on a screen at Wilford (approx.) 5 years ago but there have been no significant works since then.

Fiscal Policy

131. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on a recent Fiscal Advisory Council report (details supplied) which states that the Government has failed to deliver on its commitment to publish a credible medium-term strategy with SPU 2021, that the recent SPU is based on poorly-founded medium-term spending forecasts and does not incorporate major policy commitments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32347/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): Since its establishment in 2011, the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council carries out an important independent role in assessing Government's fiscal strategy. In its recent Fiscal Assessment Report (FAR) the Council has produced a detailed analysis on the fiscal projections in the Stability Programme Update (SPU) and also on the fiscal response to the Covid crisis.

In this regard, it is important to note the Council's assessment that the Government's response to the pandemic to date has been both warranted and appropriate, and in particular that the Government's decision to continue exceptional temporary supports in 2021 was appropriate.

Looking forward, consistent with the approach set out in the SPU, the FAR outlines that Government should reduce supports in a gradual way, supporting those most affected and calibrating this based on how the recovery evolves. This approach is reflected in recent Government decisions with regard to the extension of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme.

The FAR also outlined the Fiscal Advisory Council's views regarding the need for Government to publish a credible medium-term strategy. Given the level of uncertainty in relation to the pandemic at the time the SPU was being compiled, it was decided to prepare the SPU on a technical 'no policy change' basis. In this context, from an expenditure perspective, technical core expenditure ceilings were set out in the SPU based on an average annual growth in total voted expenditure of 3½%. The FAR outlines that this level of annual growth in voted expenditure is insufficient to account for medium term 'stand-still costs' associated with maintaining existing public services. However, it would have to be acknowledged that this 'stand-still' posi-

tion is largely driven by certain assumptions in relation to medium term price effects rather than pre-committed levels of spending.

The SPU has provided a fiscal baseline that will support Government in reaching decisions in relation to a credible medium term fiscal pathway taking account of major policy priorities. It is intended that the Summer Economic Statement will set out the Government's fiscal position in more detail, taking account inter alia of the advancements in the vaccine rollout and the position with the pandemic.

Departmental Funding

132. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his attention has been drawn to a disparity in funding allocations across several Departments between areas in Cork city; and his plans to address this. [32468/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): As part of the budgetary process each year, my Department sets overall expenditure ceilings for each Ministerial Vote Group. These are laid out at Budget time in the Expenditure Report with further detail then provided in the Revised Estimates for Public Services. Following allocation of each Ministerial Expenditure Ceiling, it is a matter for each Minister to assign funding as appropriate at programme and subhead level for their Departments and the agencies under their remit taking into account the demands for services in different areas and regions, having regard to demographics and other relevant factors.

Public Sector Staff

133. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the way in which he plans to further facilitate remote working for public sector workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32333/21]

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.

National Development Plan

134. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on whether all contracts for capital works laid out in the National Development Plan should be required to contain social clauses which require contractors to hire a certain proportion of their staff from the live register and create a certain number of apprenticeships. [31969/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The appropriateness of including social considerations needs to be examined on a contract-by-contract basis and there needs to be sufficient flexibility to allow each individual contracting authority to

decide what, how, and when social considerations can be used. It is not intended to include social clauses incorporating employment activation measures in public works contracts generally since there is a substantial risk that doing so would cause considerable displacement of those already in employment. It is a matter for individual contracting authorities to ensure that their public procurement activities are discharged in line with procurement rules and procedures. The Office of Government Procurement (OGP) supports contracting authorities in this regard by making them aware of their legal and policy obligations in respect to public procurement.

The OGP has been promoting the inclusion of social considerations. To further support the incorporation of social considerations into public procurement, the OGP published Circular 20/2019: Promoting the use of Environmental and Social Considerations in Public Procurement. The Circular highlights the possibilities for Departments to deliver wider social and environmental aims through public procurement including in relation to employment and training opportunities for disadvantaged groups, disability access, promoting social inclusion and social enterprises.

To help policy makers and practitioners understand how procurement can be used to facilitate the advancement of existing social policy objectives as well as the wider context and implications of including them in particular procurement projects, the OGP published an Information Note on incorporating social considerations into public procurement in December 2018 which is available on ogp.gov.ie. A cross-departmental Social Considerations Advisory Group, since re-titled the Strategic Procurement Advisory Group, was also established in March 2019.

These developments promote and facilitate the inclusion of social considerations in a structured manner and are aimed at helping policy makers and procurement practitioners understand how procurement can be used to support advancement of existing social policy objectives, the wider context and the implications of including them in procurement projects.

Flood Risk Management

135. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform when flood remediation works to be undertaken by the Office of Public Works will commence at Springfield, Clonlara, County Clare. [32137/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): Clare County Council (CCC) is the contracting authority in relation to the proposed flood relief scheme in Springfield/Clonlara, with funding provided by the Office of Public Works (OPW). The current position is as follows:

CCC have been in contact with land owners affected by the proposals and has consulted with local residents and relevant statutory bodies. The Council submitted the proposed works for planning permission, which was granted by An Bord Pleanála in November 2020. Since then detailed design and further survey work have been ongoing and are now substantially complete. It was recently identified by the scheme consultants Byrne Looby & Associates that some final additional Ground Investigations were required prior to construction commencing. Contractors have carried out trial holes and ground investigation work, and the results of these were assessed by a specialist Consultant Hydrogeologist. Following that review, a draft Hydrogeology Report on the groundwater flows in Springfield has now been completed, the findings of which are currently being considered by the Scheme Consultants Byrne Looby. A recommendations report from Byrne Looby is currently awaited on progression of the scheme based on the Hydrogeologists Report.

Clare County Council and the OPW are extremely disappointed that this delay has occurred but are committed to finding a solution which will allow us to move forward at the earliest juncture. It is proposed to carry out the construction works using OPW direct labour.

National Development Plan

136. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform when the revised National Development Plan 2018-2027 will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32336/21]

165. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform when it is intended to announce the details of the revised National Development Plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31516/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I propose to take Questions Nos. 136 and 165 together.

The review of the National Development Plan is currently ongoing.

As part of the Programme for Government the review was brought forward to 2021 in order to assess the resourcing requirements for the most important challenges facing us as a nation including climate action, infrastructural challenges, housing, balanced regional development, healthcare, social welfare policy, transport, and education.

The first phase commenced in October 2020, which included the public consultation, Review to Renew, as well as further evidence-gathering by way of sectoral submissions for Departments and a series of technical papers.

The results of Phase 1 were published in a report on April 4th 2021 on my Department's website.

The technical and consultative work carried out as part of Phase 1 forms the evidence base to underpin the decisions to be taken in Phase 2 of the NDP.

The objective of Phase 2 of the NDP is to set out revised sectoral capital allocations for the upcoming 10-year period, including non-Exchequer investment, as well as providing a renewed focus on delivery of efficient and cost-effective public infrastructure. The range of indicated sectoral priorities will be identified as part of the final revised NDP.

Engagement is ongoing with Departments in this regard with a view to progressing this work over the coming period.

Work is underway with a view to finalisation of the NDP this summer. The overall timetable in this regard, and as regards publication of the revised NDP, will naturally be coordinated with other Government policy initiatives which have a bearing upon our overall capital and infrastructure priorities.

Public Sector Staff

137. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the most recent estimate for the cost of removing the requirement for staff in the public service to work additional hours which were introduced on foot of the Haddington Road Agreement in

2013. [32341/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The additional hours introduced on foot of the Haddington Road Agreement are of significant value to the State and critical to supporting the delivery of public services, including in front line services in health, education, Revenue and Social Protection, where they are deeply embedded in their delivery structures. This increased capacity was evident over the last year with the agility, commitment and flexibility demonstrated by the public service in meeting the challenges of the Covid 19 pandemic.

Under the new public service pay agreement ‘Building Momentum, 2021 - 2022’, an independent body has been established to examine the additional hours worked by public servants under the Haddington Road Agreement.

The body will consider, and fully take into account, submissions made by the parties to the Agreement and will be tasked to report by end 2021. As part of the deliberative process, the body, will consider:

- The context for the pay and productivity measures within the Haddington Road Agreement.
- The quantification and verification of the additional worked by the Haddington Road Agreement grade, group and sector.
- Any associated costs with reference to possible replacement mechanisms, e.g. rostering changes, productivity measures, recruitment, overtime/premia payments, agency staffing.
- The operational, service delivery and administrative implications associated with any reduction in hourly work requirements, including the proportion of hours that support direct service delivery compared with those that provide indirect services.
- The manner in which additional hours contributed to more standardised public service terms and conditions.
- the varying application of the additional hours provision of the Haddington Road Agreement.
- Relevant overtime divisors.

Roll-out of the body’s recommendations will be initiated within the lifetime of the Agreement. In this regard, to enable commencement of the recommendations during 2022, on the publication of the Report, an envelope of €150m will be made available under the Agreement across all affected grades, groups, categories and sectors. In the context of the 2023 estimates, having regard to available resources, on publication of the Report, the parties to the Agreement will engage proactively in relation to such provisions as are necessary to roll out any remaining recommendations.

It is the role of the independent body to quantify and verify the costs and replacement mechanisms for any removal of the additional hours. However, IGEES have previously undertaken analysis of this issue published in the context of Budget 2018, which may be of assistance to the Deputy and can be found at the following link:

<http://www.budget.gov.ie/Budgets/2018/Documents/2.Estimating%20the%20Value%20of%20Additional%20Hours%20Worked%20-%20HRA%20and%20CPA.pdf>

My Department will be building on this work as part of its engagement with the Indepen-

dent Body.

Office of Public Works

138. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans for Sceilig Mhichíl for the 2021 season; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32348/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): At the beginning of the month, the 21st June 2021 was announced as a target date for the re-opening of Skellig Michael to visitors. This date was of course, dependent on weather conditions being favourable, allowing works to progress in a timely manner prior to opening.

While preparatory work has commenced on the island, delays have resulted due to necessary monitoring of the bird population on the island as well as the completion of the digital survey of the monastery. In addition, weather conditions have been unfavourable, reducing the time OPW operatives could obtain access to the site for works. The progress of these works is under constant review and discussions remain ongoing regarding the re-opening of the site to visitors at a time at the soonest time that it is deemed safe to do so

The revised target date for the re-opening of the island to visitors is 1st July 2021.

Public Sector Staff

139. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if there are new plans in place for the decentralisation or relocation of public sector jobs from Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32334/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Programme for Government makes a number of commitments in relation to more balanced regional development. This includes, where possible, the commitment to prioritise the siting of new State Agencies and Government Offices in towns and cities outside of Dublin. While many Departments may traditionally have been headquartered in Dublin, over half of all civil servants are now located outside of Dublin. In the case of my own Department, for example, personnel within my Department and Agencies under my Department are based in several regions throughout the country. This includes a significant payroll operation for the National Shared Services Office that is based in Killarney that undertakes payroll transactions for the entire civil service, as well as procurement operations in Sligo, Limerick and Little Island in Cork.

The vast majority of open competitions for civil service positions, which are advertised by the Public Appointments Service on www.publicjobs.ie, allow for the formation of regional panels to fill regional vacancies as the business need arises at all levels within the civil service. Additionally, my Department operates a Mobility Programme for the civil service whereby eligible civil servants can apply for transfer to another geographic region within the country at their current grade including, for example, from Dublin to Galway or vice versa.

As the Deputy will appreciate, Covid-19 has posed unprecedented challenges for the workforce in both the private sector and public sector in Ireland. It has also afforded new opportunities and innovative ways of working that we are all eager to harness into the future. The Programme for Government commits to an Enterprise Policy as part of the National Develop-

ment Plan to enable increased remote, flexible and hub-working arrangements to promote better work-life balance, higher female labour market participation, less commuting, and greater regional balance.

Public Sector Staff

140. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he is engaged in discussions to agree revised principles for a new higher education staffing agreement to update the current employment control framework; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32471/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): Officials from my Department engage on an ongoing basis with colleagues in the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (DFHERIS) and the Higher Education Authority (HEA) on multiple policy and operational issues, including consideration of principles for a Higher Education Staffing Agreement. The purpose of a Higher Education Staffing Agreement, once finalised, will be to update the existing overarching Employment Control Framework (ECF) approach which has been in place since 2010 and which is still in place in a number of sectors in the public service.

While the operation and management of the existing ECF approach is a matter for DFHERIS, HEA and the Higher Education Institutes (HEIs), key issues from my Department's perspective are to ensure that it appropriately reflects fiscal, expenditure and public service staffing and pay policies. Regarding the overarching principles for a new approach, my Department is seeking to ensure that staffing decisions taken in the higher education sector are affordable and sustainable both from a higher education perspective but also from an Exchequer and wider public service staffing and pensions perspective. My Department is also mindful of the need to ensure that there is appropriate flexibility built in to any revised approach so that HEIs can operate efficiently in make their staffing decisions, having regard to their overall expenditure allocations and other appropriate controls.

National Broadband Plan

141. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform further to Parliamentary Question No. 71 of 1 June 2021, his views on the fact that there are no penalties included in the National Broadband Plan; if his attention was drawn to this fact when the contract was signed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32271/21]

159. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform further to Parliamentary Question No. 71 of 1 June 2021, if his position on the National Broadband Plan has changed or remains the same as outlined in correspondence (details supplied) of 1 April 2019; and his views on the statement in the reply which outlines that the National Broadband Plan is significantly behind schedule. [32272/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I propose to take Questions Nos. 141 and 159 together.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) contract was signed in November 2019, and is being delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract to roll out a high-speed and future-proofed broadband network within the intervention area, which covers 1.1 million people living and working in over 544,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms,

along with 695 schools. Prior to Government approving the NBP contract, my Department provided views and advice to Government in relation to the proposed contract. The Government approved the contract in May 2019, which was subsequently signed in November 2019, and the project is now being delivered by NBI. Following the signing of the NBP contract, my Department no longer has any operational role in relation to the National Broadband Plan. As the contract was signed by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, responsibility for all matters in relation to the contract, including governance and operational performance, are now a matter for my colleague, the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications. My position, and the position of Government, is now to seek to accelerate the roll out of the NBP, as committed to in the Programme for Government. However, it is my understanding that, among other governance arrangements, the contract signed in November 2019 contains a suite of key performance indicators to ensure the service is maintained appropriately, including significant penalties to address under-performance, and substantial provisions to reclaim the subsidy from NBI in the event of cost savings achieved or additional revenues generated. These include clawback on the deployment phase, during network operation, and at contract expiry. I understand there is also a clawback mechanism with respect to any sale of shares in NBI. However, as already indicated, I and my Department have no operational role in relation to the management of the NBP contract and any questions regarding the contract and/or its roll out should be directed to the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications.

Office of Public Works

142. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will initiate a review conducted by the OPW in conjunction with An Garda Síochána to investigate if the former Garda station on Tubbermore Road, Dalkey could be utilised by An Garda Síochána for the purposes of a base for a dedicated public transport unit or other divisional unit due to its proximity to the DART line. [32483/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The Commissioners of Public Works have advised me that operational matters for An Garda Síochána are exclusively a matter for the Garda Commissioner under the Garda Síochána Act 2005. As such, it is a matter for the Garda Commissioner to determine any future requirements for the organisation.

Office of Public Works

143. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the progress of the Office of Public Works project at Carlow castle. [32329/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): As the Deputy is aware, extensive damage was caused to Carlow Castle in February 2020 as the result of a storm. Subsequent investigations led to the discovery that the base of the collapse was constructed on clay foundations which has had major consequences for the safe repair and reconstruction of this section of wall. OPW is currently working to secure an appropriate method of ensuring that the tower can be made safe for the future.

Ballasts, needed to provide stability and balance, are now in place as is a temporary roof. Once the temporary works to prevent further damage are signed off, the next phase of design will commence. This will involve surveys and archaeological investigation at the base of the

structure to assess it's current condition. This will inform the repair methodology going forward. It is too early at this stage to predict what the results of these surveys and investigations will be.

Public Expenditure Policy

144. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his Department have identified any particular tendencies in the context of public spending, current or capital, including any inflationary elements which may require any corrective measures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32391/21]

167. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the degree to which he remains satisfied with regard to public expenditure levels in the current year to date; if any particular concerns have arisen which may require specific attention now or at a later date; if all Government Departments and their subsidiary bodies continue to operate within the criteria laid down; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32390/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I propose to take Questions Nos. 144 and 167 together.

In the period from 2014, prior to the impact of Covid-19, the overall fiscal strategy adopted by the Government greatly improved the monetary position of the State with the deficit at the end of 2014 of €7.1 billion or 3.6% of GDP moving to a surplus of 0.5% of GDP at the end of 2019. The position regarding gross general government debt against GDP also improved over this time period, from 104.4% of GDP at the end of 2014 to 57.4% of GDP at the end of 2019.

Underpinning this fiscal strategy was the policy of sustainable annual increases in public expenditure during this timeframe, with gross voted expenditure increasing by a total of €13.1 billion or 24%, from €54.1 billion in 2014 to €67.2 billion in 2019. Over this period, to allow for the delivery of key infrastructure projects, there has been a clear focus on increasing levels of capital investment by the State.

The decisions made in recent budgets have ensured that we had the financial resources to act in response to Covid-19 and to provide substantial supports to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic during 2020 and for 2021, with some €28 billion allocated to date across the two years for support measures.

For 2021, the Revised Estimates for Public Services (REV) outlined an overall Government Expenditure Ceiling of €87.8 billion, which included almost €12 billion in funding to respond to Covid-19. Within this overall expenditure ceiling, €5.4 billion was set aside in reserve to be used as required during the year for temporary, targeted measures to mitigate the impacts of Covid-19.

This reserve was partially allocated as part of Further Revised Estimates agreed by Government in April, with almost €4.3 billion in additional funding provided to the Departments of Social Protection; Enterprise, Trade and Employment; and Rural and Community Development for measures in response to the impact of Covid-19. In addition to this, additional Departmental Estimates will be presented to the Dáil in due course reflecting the various measures set out in the National Economic Recovery Plan.

It is a key responsibility of every Department and Minister to manage expenditure within their respective allocations, particularly given the exceptional level of funding being provided this year, and careful monitoring of spending against profile and of progress on programmes

and projects is required. My Department is in regular contact with all other Departments and Offices regarding this.

Based on Departmental Estimates presented to the Dáil to date and as set out in the most recent Fiscal Monitor, total gross voted expenditure to end-May 2021 amounted to nearly €33 billion. While this is nearly €1½ billion ahead on the same period in 2020, the public health restrictions in place this year have impacted on spending plans of departments. Accordingly, gross voted expenditure is running almost €1.4 billion or 4% below profile.

In 2021 the main spending Departments will be reporting to Government quarterly on spending within their areas. This stands alongside a range of reforms implemented in recent years in order to enhance Ireland's budgetary framework and to ensure efficient and effective management of public expenditure. Looking forward, the Programme for Government commits to continuing reform and improvement of the Budgetary process, building on the budgetary reforms already in place and the significant work on public service reform already completed.

Furthermore, inflationary pressures continue to be dealt with on a year-by-year basis as part of the normal budgetary process. There is an expectation and a responsibility across all Departments and agencies to generate efficiency dividends and promote productivity with the resources that are provided. As the economy recovers from the impact of the pandemic, we will continue to monitor and develop our budgetary process with a view to ensuring that value for money is delivered across Government projects and programmes.

Public Sector Staff

145. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the position in relation to remote working arrangements for civil servants and other public sector workers; if the results of the recent survey among civil servants in relation to remote working will be taken on board by his Department in the months ahead; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32213/21]

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.

Public Sector Staff

146. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will conduct a study into the possible operation of a four day week in the public and civil service and in particular will his Department examine the experience of other jurisdictions that have adopted such measures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32470/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The matter of a four day working week has been raised by the Four Day Week Ireland campaign led by Forsa, ICTU and other civil society groups. Correspondence on this issue has been received in my Department and I note that the campaign has engaged with the Tanáiste on their proposals.

In the context of the civil and public service, there are two main concerns in considering a move to a four day week - the cost to the taxpayer and ensuring the continuity of services to the public.

On the issue of costs, there are potentially significant costs associated with a move to a four day week in the public service. Significant additional recruitment would be required in order to ensure the continued delivery of essential public services, in particular in terms of frontline and emergency public services that must be available on a seven day basis.

A comprehensive analysis of the potential costs involved would involve a high degree of complexity, as it would encompass over 342,000 public servants in nearly 200 organisations. At a very high level, paying people for four days but providing services to the citizen over five and in some cases seven days would add at least a fifth to the current pay bill of approximately €21bn. That equates to an extra €4.2bn that would have to be found to deliver the same level of services. This is likely a conservative estimate, given the premiums associated with overtime and agency staffing, which would likely be required.

In addition, maintaining the accessibility of services to citizens would be a huge challenge. For example, would there be sufficient time in four days to teach our children properly? What would happen to childcare costs if the public service moved but parts of the private sector did not? And how would the emergency services - hospitals, fire brigades, lifeguards and the Gardaí - operate on a four day week?

These are essential public services, the importance of which has been underlined by the Covid-19 pandemic. The wider implications of this proposal also need to be carefully considered for the entire labour force, not just the public service. Indeed any movement by the public service in isolation could have serious consequences for, in particular, small to medium businesses already struggling in the face of Covid-19.

I would also like to make the point that the State is already a good employer that offers considerable flexibility to staff through the availability of, amongst other things, work sharing, flexible working hours, shorter working years, career breaks and now remote working. At this time, work is underway on developing a framework for 'blended' working, which is a priority area for my Department.

In my role as Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform I have to ensure that quality public services are delivered to the Irish people in a manner that delivers value for money to the Irish taxpayer.

With this in mind, and in light of the large potential costs and disruption to critical services I do not believe that it is the right time to consider a transition to a four day week.

Flood Risk Management

147. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of approving the Crossmolina flood relief scheme; when final approval is likely to be granted to allow the scheme proceed to tender; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31853/21]

153. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the current position in relation to the flood alleviation scheme for Crossmolina, County Mayo; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32335/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Pat-

rick O'Donovan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 147 and 153 together.

Thank you, Deputy Dillon and Deputy Calleary, for your queries in relation to the much needed Flood Relief Scheme in Crossmolina. The current status in relation to Crossmolina Flood Relief Scheme is as follows:

As part of the approval process under the Arterial Drainage act, the Office of Public Works (OPW) submitted the scheme documentation to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (MPER) for Statutory Confirmation. As part of this statutory process, stakeholders were afforded a formal opportunity to provide comments on the environmental element of the proposed works. Once this step concluded, the Department of Public Expenditure (DPER) procured independent consultants to carry out an assessment of the Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIAR) and Natura Impact Statement (NIS).

Following a review of the material by DPER, the OPW received comments and requests for supplementary information. The project team for the Crossmolina Flood Relief Scheme are now compiling a response to DPER and will respond with the additional requested information in July. Once DPER receive our comments, they will in turn have to review this material prior to granting Statutory Confirmation of the Scheme. I cannot provide an indicative timeline for this stage of the Confirmation process as this is outside of our control.

Subject to a satisfactory conclusion of DPER's Consultation and Independent Review, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform will give statutory consent to the scheme, allowing the project team to bring Crossmolina to construction. Subject to confirmation, it is currently anticipated that the OPW construction crew will be in a position to commence advance construction works this year. These are indicative timelines and may vary depending on the confirmation process and favourable ground conditions.

Once DPER/MPER have completed their review, further information will be provided on the project website, which is available at: <https://www.floodinfo.ie/frs/en/crossmolina/home/>

Office of Public Works

148. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the OPW will be taking on a management role at heritage sites currently operated by Shannon Heritage in County Clare. [32138/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): Bunratty Castle is a National Monument in State care, protected by legislation.

The Commissioners of Public Works are currently engaged in an assessment of the building's fabric and installations with a view to estimating the potential cost of undertaking any necessary works. At this point in time, no decision has been made in relation to the Commissioner's role in the future management of the site.

National Children's Hospital

149. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his Department has received a report from the Department of Health on the most recent cost estimate and timescale for the completion of the new National Children's Hospital. [32342/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Minister for Health and his Department have oversight responsibility in relation to the National Children's Hospital. I understand that the Minister for Health is in the process of preparing an update on this matter for Government.

Question No. 150 answered with Question No. 121.

Departmental Offices

151. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of and position regarding the overpayment of rent at the Miesian Plaza; the contacts which his officials have had with the landlord over the past three months; and when he expects to recoup this overpayment. [32464/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I am informed by the Commissioners of Public Works (OPW) that since the previous question on this matter was tabled by Deputy Shortall in April, they have continued to engage with the landlord in relation to the measurement standard applied as the basis of calculation of the annual rent of Miesian Plaza. A further, without prejudice, meeting was held on 3rd June 2021 and while there was a constructive discussion around the general issue, further discussions will be necessary to progress the matter. Both the OPW and the Landlord are committed to continuing this process with a view to establishing if a solution that is acceptable to both parties can be reached.

Flood Risk Management

152. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the completion of the flood relief scheme in Skibbereen and Bantry, County Cork. [32353/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): In relation to the flood relief schemes in Bantry and Skibbereen, County Cork, I am advised as follows:

Bantry Flood Relief Scheme:

The Flood Risk Management Plans launched in May 2018 included a recommendation to progress the project-level development and planning of a flood relief scheme for Bantry. A Steering Group, comprising representatives from the Office of Public Works and Cork County Council, is in place to progress the Bantry Flood Relief Scheme. The Plans, with outline design of possible measures, estimated a preliminary Total Project Cost of €6.7m for the scheme, which will protect some 198 properties.

On 11th March 2021 Cork County Council, in partnership with OPW, issued the tender documentation for the procurement of Engineering Consultants via www.etenders.gov.ie. Tenders are due for return on 26th July 2021.

Once consultants are appointed to progress the Flood Relief Scheme for Bantry, consultation with statutory and non-statutory bodies, as well as the public, will take place at the appropriate stages to ensure that all parties have the opportunity to input into the development of this scheme. In the meantime, Cork County Council has engaged a contractor to treat some of the invasive species in preparation for a flood relief scheme for the town.

The flood relief scheme will be funded from within the allocated €1 billion for flood risk management over the period of the National Development Plan 2018-2027. Provision for the cost of the Scheme is included in the Office of Public Works' multi-annual capital allocation.

Cork County Council have also commenced the preparation of the consultants brief to carry out the repair and re-construction of the Main Street Culvert, which has been identified as a significant element contributing to flooding on Main Street, New Street and north and south of Wolfe Tone Square in recent months. The OPW is liaising with Cork County Council on the integration of these works with the flood relief scheme for the town.

In March 2021, an application under the Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme for interim works to mitigate flooding in Bantry, which includes installation of non-return valves and provision of mobile pumps, was submitted to the OPW by Cork County Council. This application is currently under consideration.

In addition to the above proposals, prior to forecasted extreme weather events, local area staff from CCC are implementing interim measures to assist mitigate flooding, such as deployment of sandbags at Sands Quay and mobile pumping.

Skibbereen Flood Relief Scheme

Construction of the Skibbereen Flood Relief Scheme commenced in July 2016 and was substantially completed on 6th June 2019. The Scheme was constructed under the Arterial Drainage Acts, with Cork City Council acting as Contracting Authority and agent for the OPW. All identified defects arising from the construction have now been remedied, with some delays as a result of Covid-19.

Planning for the Operation and Maintenance of the scheme is ongoing in conjunction with Cork County Council, who will act as agents of the OPW in carrying out the statutory operation and maintenance of the scheme. A small number of works to address elements identified during construction, which were outside the main construction contract, remain to be completed and are being progressed in separate works packages.

Question No. 153 answered with Question No. 147.

Brexit Supports

154. Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the Brexit Adjustment Reserve. [24136/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Brexit Adjustment Reserve represents an important response by the European Union to the challenges posed by the United Kingdom's departure from the EU.

Ireland played a leading role in securing support for the Reserve at the marathon European Council meeting last July.

The purpose of the Reserve is to help counter the adverse economic and social consequences of Brexit in the sectors and Member States that are worst affected.

Measures may include: support to economic sectors, businesses and local communities, including those dependent on fishing activities in the UK waters; support to employment, including through short-time work schemes, re-skilling and training; ensuring the functioning of border, customs, sanitary and phytosanitary and security controls, fisheries control, certification

and authorisation regimes for products, communication, information and awareness raising for citizens and businesses.

It is generally acknowledged that Ireland is the Member State most impacted by Brexit and so we expect to be a significant beneficiary of the Reserve.

For Ireland, relevant areas for support are expected to include enterprise supports; supports for the agri-food sector; fisheries; reskilling and retraining; and infrastructure for the ports and airport.

At the end of April the Council of Ministers agreed its position on the Brexit Adjustment Reserve, ahead of trilogue negotiations with the European Parliament and the European Commission that are now underway.

The Council proposes that Ireland would receive the largest single Member State allocation of just over €1 billion, or just over 20% of available funding.

The proposed allocation for Ireland reflects the unique, adverse and disproportionate impact of Brexit on our economy, and reflects continuing strong EU solidarity with Ireland.

State Bodies

155. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will report on gender balance on State boards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32360/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): Data from the State Boards website indicates that the average gender breakdown of the 2,120 board members is now 45% (954) female and 55% (1,166) male. There are 208 non-vacant boards (a vacant board is an established board with no board members currently in place).

In 2021, 34% of applicants to State Boards were female, and 52% of those appointed to State Boards were female.

108 non-vacant boards (51.9%) have met the goal of having at least 40% of each gender represented on the board in question.

I am committed to furthering the diversity of gender representation on State Boards. In September 2020, I launched an Annex to the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies, dealing with the issues of *Gender Balance, Diversity and Inclusion*. This Annex sets out measures designed to enhance the diversity of membership of State Boards, addressing recommendations made by the Inter-departmental group report on Gender Balance on State Boards (2019).

Notwithstanding the progress made to date, I will continue to look at options to further gender diversity on State Boards.

Public Sector Staff

156. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on additional holiday entitlements for workers in the public sector who were frontline workers during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32463/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): Workers across the economy, including of course our public servants, have made an extraordinary contribution during the COVID pandemic and I would like to pay tribute to them.

Notwithstanding the sacrifices and efforts of the last year or more and the progress we have made in recent months to roll out vaccines, this pandemic remains an ongoing challenge for us all and it continues, for now, to require our full focus and attention.

Accordingly, while this is not yet, I believe, the most appropriate time to deal with this matter, the Government will consider in due course how best to recognise the efforts made by workers during this pandemic.

Question No. 157 answered with Question No. 121.

Flood Risk Management

158. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his Department will carry out an audit of flood prevention embankments and other infrastructure to establish the potential that such infrastructure holds for adaptation to walking and cycling infrastructure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32349/21]

Minister for State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The provision of walkways and cycleways is a matter for local authorities and the Office of Public Works (OPW) would be happy to work with the local authorities and other State bodies with their planned development of such community assets, where feasible.

In respect of the OPW's planned programme of flood relief works that involve embankments, the OPW works with those local authorities that wish to explore opportunities for the provision, where feasible, of additional public realm elements such as cycling and walking.

The Deputy will be aware that the OPW is responsible for the maintenance of embankments that form part of arterial drainage schemes it completed under the Arterial Drainage Acts. These embankments are not in State ownership but are on lands that are for the most part privately owned. I am advised that these embankments were not designed or constructed to cater for cycleways or walkways and might not have the capability to have any sort of walking or cycling infrastructure placed on top of them.

Question No. 159 answered with Question No. 141.

Civil Service

160. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will report on follow-up trade union and worker engagement planned following the publication of the Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey 2020 COVID-19 Remote Working Report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32462/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I launched the COVID-19 Remote Working Report in December 2020 following the Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey which took place in September-October 2020. Over 20,000 civil servants engaged with the remote working module making it the largest workplace survey on remote working undertaken in Ireland during the pandemic.

As a follow on to the Launch, on March 4th 2021, my Department hosted an online event entitled *COVID-19 and the Future of Remote Working: National and International Perspectives*. The event included expert participation from the OECD and the National University of Ireland, Galway which contextualised the Report with regard to the national and international experience of remote working during the pandemic. The event was attended by over 1,200 civil servants from across the country.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment in relation to remote working. In this context, my Department is working with employers and stakeholders to develop a longer term approach to this issue appropriate to the civil and public service. The findings of the survey and subsequent engagements are valuable inputs to this policy formulation process.

Question No. 161 answered with Question No. 119.

Flood Risk Management

162. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of flood defences in the Spanish Arch and docks area of Galway city; the details of any public consultation taken to date or planned in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32125/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): Galway City Council is leading the development of a flood relief scheme for Galway City, with technical advice and funding being provided by the Office of Public Works. Following a tender process undertaken by the City Council, consultants were appointed in November, 2020, to review and build on the initial proposals in the FRMP. Public consultation will be to the forefront during the development of options that will eventually lead to a preferred scheme to be brought through the Planning process. The opening public engagement process is currently underway; beginning on 1st June and finishing on 7th July 2021. This event has been widely advertised and is being held online due to current Covid 19 restrictions.

The project, now identified as the “Coirib go Cósta – Galway City Flood Relief Scheme” has a website (<http://www.coiribgocosta.ie/>) that provides information on this public engagement process and the facility for public comments and submissions. This website will continue to provide up-to-date information on the project as it moves forward through its development. There will, of course, be several such public engagement events throughout the course of the project, both with the statutory and non-statutory stakeholders and the general public before the final design is chosen in order to keep those living, working and visiting the City fully informed of developments.

Pension Provisions

163. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the reason his Department has chosen to propose a once-off gratuity for the community enterprise scheme supervisors and assistant supervisors as opposed to the pension scheme recommended by the Labour Court in 2008; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32045/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Deputy will be aware that the matter of community employment schemes falls within the policy remit of the Minister for Social Protection.

I have however a strong appreciation of the role of Community Employment Schemes in communities right across the country and I know that this role could not be fulfilled without the leadership of the Scheme Supervisors. In this context I have taken the opportunity to meet with the relevant parties involved in these schemes to hear at first hand their issues of concern.

The particular matter raised is a complex one that raises significant policy, legal and exchequer cost issues. As it relates to the Community Employment scheme, a resolution must be progressed via the Department of Social Protection. The Deputy will appreciate that the State is not the employer of the workers concerned. This is a factor which must be borne in mind in the terms of the approach to this.

As the Deputy will also appreciate, we are now facing major challenges in managing the public finances. However, in conjunction with the Minister for Social Protection, I have given fresh consideration to all the issues involved and have recently written to Minister Humphries in relation to a proposed way forward in relation to this complex issue. I understand that Minister Humphries and her officials are now in the process of engaging with the relevant stakeholders to make progress.

National Lottery

164. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the details of the expenditure on good causes undertaken by the National Lottery over the past year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32358/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The National Lottery does not undertake any expenditure on Good Causes, however I am pleased that €254m was transferred from the National Lottery Fund to the Exchequer in 2020 to be utilised by Good Causes projects. This represents a 1.4% increase on 2019 levels.

As per the terms of the National Lottery Licence, 65% of gross gaming revenue is made available for use by Good Causes. The National Lottery Regulator transfers these moneys from the National Lottery Fund to the Central Fund of the Exchequer pursuant to section 44 of the National Lottery Act 2013, to be utilised for the purposes set out in section 41 of the 2013 Act.

Funding is provided by the Oireachtas, in accordance with the 2013 Act, through expenditure subheads which form part of Departmental expenditure programmes.

A breakdown by Department of all the expenditure areas that are supported by National Lottery proceeds is set out in Appendix 1 of the Annual Revised Estimates for Public Services: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/e20037-revised-estimates/#2021>

Question No. 165 answered with Question No. 136.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

166. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the cumulative additional expenditure undertaken to support the economy and society during the Covid-19 pandemic to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32359/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): To date over €28 billion has been provided in direct voted expenditure measures for Covid-19 related supports across 2020 and 2021. This substantial additional funding has been critical in supporting

our citizens and businesses devastated by the impact of the pandemic and providing the necessary funding to our key public services to allow them to respond effectively to the crisis.

Following the onset of the pandemic in 2020, additional funding of over €16 billion was allocated to Departments during the year to provide supports in response to Covid-19. Key areas where this additional funding was allocated include: over €10 billion provided to the Department of Social Protection to fund measures including direct income supports for businesses and workers; €2.5 billion for the Health service; almost €1 billion for business supports through the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment in addition to €0.9 billion to meet the costs of the commercial rates waiver; along with substantial additional funding for the transport and education sectors. At the end of 2020, gross voted expenditure as per the outturn in the December 2020 Fiscal Monitor was €85.3 billion, almost €15 billion higher than the original pre-Covid allocation of €70.4 billion reflecting the impact of the additional funding allocated to respond to Covid-19.

Budget 2021 provided for an overall expenditure ceiling of €87.8 billion, with almost €12 billion of this available to fund measures to continue the response to the challenges of Covid-19. €6½ billion of this was allocated at Departmental level for measures related to Covid-19 while €5.4 billion was set aside in reserve.

Among the main measures provided for by the additional allocations to Departments: were the continuation of employment and income supports, with €3.2 billion for Social Protection; €1.9 billion to support the health service; just over €0.45 billion to the Education sector (including Further and Higher Education); roughly €0.45 billion for transport measures; €0.1 billion for on-going Covid-19 supports to businesses; and over €0.2 billion for measures to address the significant impacts on sectors including tourism, culture, and sport.

The allocation of almost €4.3 billion of contingency funding to Departments was agreed by Government in April. This provided for €4 billion of additional funding to the Department of Social Protection, primarily to fund the extension of the PUP and EWSS to the end of June, an additional €250m for a range of business supports and €10m additional funding to the Covid-19 Stability Fund.

The Economic Recovery Plan published by Government on June 1st announced continued support for people and businesses. Where costs for these measures exceed the provision already made available, additional estimates for Departments will be necessary, with an increase to the Government Expenditure Ceiling as required.

Question No. 167 answered with Question No. 144.

Defective Building Materials

168. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if engagement has taken place with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on extending the pyrite remediation scheme to counties Mayo and Donegal; his plans to consider expanding the pyrite remediation scheme or increasing the funding made available under the defective concrete blocks grant scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32061/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The pyrite grant scheme comes under the remit of my colleague the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage and is administered by the relevant local authorities.

This scheme was informed by the work of an Expert Panel and finalised in consultation

with the Office of the Attorney General and my Department. Any changes to the scheme would require a whole of Government approach. I will of course engage with colleagues in relation to any proposals to amend the scheme and its funding requirements.

Job Losses

169. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the action that has been taken to find replacement employers in view of the impending closure of two pharmaceutical companies in the Baldoyle industrial estate, Dublin 17; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32531/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I was very disappointed to hear that Teva Pharmaceuticals plans to close its Sudocrem manufacturing plant in Baldoyle. This comes not long after the announcement by Viartis that it is to close one of its Baldoyle operations. Our primary concern is for the workers and families affected by this news. While I understand that both plants will remain operational until the end of 2022, it is nonetheless a devastating blow for those affected.

My Department has agreed a Job Loss Response Protocol with the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Education and Skills. The protocol puts in place actions to assist the workers, including welfare entitlements, job-search assistance and upskilling needs/opportunities. Every State support will be made available, when the time comes, to help workers transition and find new employment opportunities. I understand that members of the Dublin Mid-Leinster Employer Relations team have already engaged directly with Viartis to offer supports to staff being made redundant and are available to engage with Teva once a formal notification of redundancy is received. IDA Ireland is working with both companies at local and corporate level. The Agency will continue to provide support over coming months, including reviewing opportunities in terms of skills and retraining, as well as possibilities for the future use of the sites. The fact that both companies will continue to operate until the end of 2022 provides time in which to seek alternative investment for the area.

As the Deputy may be aware, plans are underway to hold a meeting with local representatives to discuss the job losses.

Employment Support Services

170. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of job coaches currently employed with specific responsibility for enabling disabled persons access the labour market; the number of job coaches employed; the cost for the relevant Department or State agency to recruit a job coach; the amount allocated for his Department to spend on job coaches; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32556/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I recommend the Deputy directs this question to the Department of Health and the Department of Social Protection, which have more direct responsibility for the issues raised.

As the Deputy may be aware, the Economic Recovery Plan states that the forthcoming Pathways to Work Strategy will increase the capacity of the Public Employment Service, assigning 150 Employment Case Officers (job coaches) during 2021 to conduct 160,000 one-to-one case worker/jobseeker meetings over a rolling 12-month period.

Under Pathways to Work 2021- 2025, an Early Engagement model for jobseekers with disabilities will be introduced, and wider take-up of incentives and supports available for the employment of people with disabilities will be promoted.

Transfer of Undertakings

171. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will advise on a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32577/21]

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.

The main provisions of the Regulations provide that all the rights and obligations of an employer under a contract of employment (including terms inserted by collective agreements), other than pension rights, are transferred to the new employer on the transfer of the business or part thereof. The new employer must also continue to observe the terms and conditions of any collective agreements until they expire or are replaced.

Both the outgoing and incoming employers are obliged to inform their respective employees' representatives of, inter alia, the reasons for the transfer and the legal, social and economic implications of the transfer.

The Redundancy Payments Act 1967 provides where there is a change in the ownership of a business and an employee continues, by arrangement, to work for the new owner with no break in employment, the employee is not entitled to any redundancy payment at the time of the change of ownership. However, continuity of employment is preserved for the purpose of the redundancy payments in the event of a dismissal or redundancy by the new employer at any future date.

The Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) is the organisation mandated to secure compliance with employment rights legislation. Employees can refer complaints to and seek adjudications from the WRC, including in situations where an employee considers that a breach of the The European Communities (Protection of Employees on Transfer of Undertakings) Regulations 2003 has occurred or there is a dispute between an employer and employee in relation to redundancy entitlements.

The WRC's Customer Service and Information Unit provides information on employment, equality and industrial relations rights and obligations. A complaint may be made using the Workplace Relations e-Complaint Form available on the WRC website.

Legislative Measures

172. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he plans to bring forward legislation to implement the recommendations of the Supreme Court ruling in *Zalewski vs. Adjudication Officer and Others* in relation to Workplace Relations Commission hearings; and the timeframe within which he plans to do so. [32591/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy

Damien English): I can confirm that Government approval was granted on 20th of April 2021 for the drafting of legislation on a number of procedural matters for the Workplace Relations Commission to give effect to the Supreme Court ruling in Zalewski.

A drafter has been assigned for this proposed legislation. Work is progressing and a Bill will be published shortly.

Departmental Expenditure

173. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the amount his Department and associated agencies have spent on social media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32611/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department spent €27,122 on social media advertising between the beginning of January 2021 and 12th June 2021. This includes expenditure on a number of awareness raising campaigns including Brexit, the National Minimum Wage and Covid 19 related communications.

With regard to the spend by the state agencies under the remit of my Department, these are operational matters for those agencies and I do not have any direct function in these matters. However, I have asked the state agencies under the remit of my Department to provide the requested information to me and I will forward this to the Deputy once received.

Departmental Expenditure

174. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the amount his Department has spent on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32628/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department has spent €17,454 on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 and 12th June 2021. This includes expenditure on a number of awareness raising campaigns including Brexit, the National Minimum Wage and Covid 19 related communications.

Departmental Expenditure

175. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the amount his Department and all associated agencies have spent on public relations consultancy costs since January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32645/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department has not incurred any public relations consultancy costs since January 2021.

With regard to the spend by the state agencies under the remit of my Department, these are operational matters for those agencies and I do not have any direct function in these matters.

However, I have asked the state agencies under the remit of my Department to provide the requested information to me and I will forward this to the Deputy once received.

Climate Action Plan

176. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the current and capital costs involved with each action item in the Interim Climate Action Plan under his Department's responsibility. [32696/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The information sought by the Deputy is below:

The cost of completing the action as part of current work programmes

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-06-17_pq176-17-06-21_en.docx]

The consultancy or service costs associated with undertaking research and analysis to complete the action

Action number	Description	Cost
52	Develop a clear understanding of the enterprise sector CO2 emissions and develop a clear decarbonisation pathway for the enterprise sector to meet current and potential future targets.	The total fixed contract price was €99,250 exclusive of VAT.
62	The Expert Group of Future Skills Needs to undertake the analysis to determine the demand for, and nature of, the skills required to deliver on key elements of Ireland's Climate Action Plan to Tackle Climate Breakdown over the years to 2030 .	The total fixed contract price was €107,561 exclusive of VAT.
53	Develop an online climate action portal for enterprises with relevant tools and content (to include a carbon calculator, template action plan, signposting to relevant agency supports).	The total fixed contract price is €76,750. the Content, actions and incentives for the portal is being developed by the Department and its agencies in conjunction with DECC & its agencies.

The exchequer allocations for specific programmes being rolled out to support enterprise with regard Climate Action.

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-06-17_pq176a-17-06-21_en.docx]

Departmental Policies

177. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will outline his key policy achievements in his Department since 27 June 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32715/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): During the last year, my Department has progressed a range of policy initiatives across its broad remit including a range of Programme for Government commitments. Details of activity during 2020 can be found in my Department's Annual Report 2020, published at www.enterprise.gov.ie.

Key policy achievements since 27 June 2020 include the following:

We published a €7 billion Jobs Stimulus in July 2020. A range of financial and regulatory measures were developed and expanded to assist businesses during the pandemic. These in-

clude ensuring that companies had access to finance through the Future Growth Loan Scheme, the SBCI-COVID-19 Working Capital Scheme, the COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme and Microfinance Ireland's COVID-19 Business Loan and Brexit Business Loan schemes. Further initiatives included the Sustaining Enterprise Fund, the Restart Grant and the Restart Grant Plus, the Online Retail Scheme and the Trading Online Voucher Scheme.

On legislation, my Department moved to implement temporary emergency measures to enable companies to meet their statutory obligations under company law and to proactively respond to the pressures businesses were facing in relation to solvency in the context of the lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 crisis. I have brought several Bills to Government for approval to draft, including the General Scheme of the Sale of Tickets (Cultural, Entertainment, Recreational and Sporting Events) Bill 2021, the General Scheme of the Consumer Rights Bill, the Competition (Amendment) Bill 2021, the Investment Screening Bill and the Control of Exports Bill. I have prioritised and accelerated the development of a new rescue process for small and micro companies with a view to ensuring that viable companies have the best possible chance of survival after COVID-19. My Department is also working on legislation to establish the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement to be a stand-alone statutory body.

The EU Platforms to Business Regulation, the first ever set of rules for creating a fair, transparent and predictable business environment for smaller businesses and traders on online platforms, was transposed into national law. A Sub-Group on Insurance Reform was established within the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery, which I chair. The Action Plan is well advanced, with important actions such as the Personal Injuries Guidelines commenced in April 2020.

Improving terms and conditions for all workers is a priority for me. We are proceeding with plans for statutory sick pay and the living wage. A Code of Practice on the Right to Disconnect was launched as part of the National Remote Working Strategy published in January 2021. We published extensive guidance, including our Guide to Supports for Businesses, the National Work Safely Protocol and guidance on safe shopping. A COVID-19 contingency plan ensured that the employment permit regime could continue to operate throughout the crisis though the introduction, on a temporary basis, of a type of 'e-employment permit'.

Other key achievements include working across Government to develop Ireland's position in response to the EU Commission proposals for the revision of the state aid framework. We published a Code of Conduct between landlords and tenants for commercial rents. We provided targeted support for companies in the area of research, development and the production of COVID-19 related products, and launched a third call under the Disruptive Technologies Innovation Fund. We worked closely with the Department of An Taoiseach on Ireland's Economic Recovery Plan, which aims to achieve rapid job creation and economic growth after the pandemic, and with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to include enterprise programmes for digitalisation and decarbonisation in Ireland's National Recovery and Resilience Plan. We contributed to the Climate Action Plan showing my Department's ongoing commitment to climate action. We also continued extensive work to ensure a coordinated and coherent approach to Brexit in preparation for all Brexit outcomes.

Following the formation of the Government in 2020, my Department took on responsibilities for trade promotion, employment rights and redundancy and insolvency policy, the Low Pay Commission, Balance for Better Business and Trading Online Vouchers.

Equality Issues

178. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit are working towards enabling access to employment for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities, including, but not limited to, persons with disabilities, persons from ethnic minorities, Travellers, Mincéirí; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32737/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Department of Social Protection has lead responsibility for labour market activation, and supporting underrepresented groups into employment. While my Department does not have responsibility for operating any employment programmes or funding any support services targeted specifically at minority or disadvantaged communities, we deal with the broader area of job creation and work to promote a diverse and equal workforce for all sections of society. Members of minority communities are able to access funding and support from the enterprise agencies and Local Enterprise Offices on the same basis as other members of the public.

My Department also leads the Government's Corporate Social Responsibility agenda and seeks to encourage business to develop strategies to integrate diversity in the workplace.

In addition, as a member of the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities Implementation Group, my Department has committed to highlight the supports that are available to facilitate the employment of people with disabilities in the open labour market, or to retain in the workforce employees who acquire a disability.

The Economic Recovery Plan commits to supporting employers in the recruitment and retention of people with disabilities and developing initiatives to improve employment opportunities for those with disabilities in rural areas including through remote working options. Under Pathways to Work 2021- 2025, an Early Engagement model for jobseekers with disabilities will be introduced, and wider take-up of incentives and supports available for the employment of people with disabilities will be promoted.

National Broadband Plan

179. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his views on a matter relating to the NBI roll-out (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32588/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in over 544,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools. The matter outlined in the Question appears to be between a subcontractor used by NBI and the individual concerned and it would not be appropriate for me to comment on individual cases. My Department expects that the commercial terms between National Broadband Ireland (NBI) and its subcontractors are in line with normal industry standards and I have asked my officials to bring this matter to the attention of NBI.

Departmental Expenditure

180. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the amount his Department and associated agencies have spent on social media advertis-

ing since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32612/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Departmental remit includes complex policy areas, oversight of regulation and service provision across key strategic services such as energy, as well as regulation of sectors such as mining and hydrocarbon exploration. Given the technical complexity, economic significance and community interest in these areas, there is a requirement to disseminate information and to address specific issues as they arise. My Department therefore necessarily incurs expenditure on social media advertising from time to time. During the period January 2021 to 12 June 2021 my Department spent €28,513 on social media advertising.

In procuring these services, my Department always seeks to ensure value for money and the keeping of expenditure to the minimum necessary.

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

Departmental Expenditure

181. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the amount his Department has spent on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32629/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department is committed to providing the highest standard of communications, stakeholder engagement, and open and transparent dialogue in order to inform policy making and enhance our services for citizens. Our communications approach is designed to enhance our reputation and build trust through collaboration and engagement. Social media is a critical tool in achieving these objectives, and we place a high value on ensuring that our social media channels are actively engaging with citizens on issues that are important to them. The Communications and Media Relations Division of my Department is responsible for managing my Department's social media accounts on Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. Given the high value my Department places on communications and public engagement, resources for our Communications and Media Relations Division have increased over the last two years, with the addition of staff with design, videography and content creation skills. This has increased capacity to create content in-house for all social channels. Despite this increased capacity, there is still a need to procure external services in video production and content creation for certain campaigns and, in this regard, a total of €738 was spent on content production costs for social media for the period specified in the Question.

Departmental Expenditure

182. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the amount his Department and all associated agencies have spent on public relations consultancy costs since January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32646/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department has spent €24,761 on public relations consultancy during the period January

2021 to date; these costs related to services provided for the Tellus project. In procuring these services, my Department always seeks to ensure value for money and keeping expenditure to the minimum necessary.

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

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

183. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if a response will issue to a query raised regarding carbon sequestration (details supplied). [32684/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Officials in my Department and across Government are currently working on a new Climate Action Plan which will include additional policies and measures in every sector to bring about the significant changes needed to transform Ireland to a climate neutral economy and resilient society by 2050. Furthermore, as part of commitments set out under the Programme for Government, my Department is working with the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to carry out a national land use review. The review will include consideration of emissions to air and water, carbon sequestration, and climate adaptation challenges. Policy co-benefits, such as rewetting or forest regrowth to mitigate flooding risks in river catchments, will be considered.

The EU Emissions Trading System is a cornerstone of EU policy on climate change mitigation promoting cost-effective emissions reduction and is the first and largest carbon market and works on the ‘cap and trade’ principle. No such trading system exists for carbon on a private landowner scale. However, I would underline that while there is much to do in terms of policy development, as I have highlighted above, with the correct policy choices in the agriculture and land use sector, there is potential to reward farmers and land owners for sequestering carbon, restoring biodiversity, improving water and air quality, producing clean energy, and developing schemes that support results-based outcomes.

I can confirm that a response to the query has been prepared and will issue this week.

Climate Action Plan

184. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the current and capital costs involved with each action item in the Interim Climate Action Plan under his Department’s responsibility. [32693/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The European Green Deal commits to delivering net zero greenhouse gas emissions at EU level by 2050 and increasing the EU-wide emissions reduction target from 40% to up to at least 55% by 2030. This ambition aligns with our Programme for Government commitment to an average 7% per annum reduction in emissions from 2021 to 2030, and to achieving net zero emissions no later than 2050.

The key aim of the Interim Climate Action Plan is to maintain a whole-of-government focus on implementation, and continue to progress new climate actions while the Climate Action

Plan 2021, to reach an average 7% per annum reduction in greenhouse gases over the decade to 2030, is being developed. It will ensure that planning and implementation go hand in hand. Once the Climate Action Plan 2021 is finalised, new actions will be ready which will build upon those in Interim Climate Actions 2021.

Achieving the transition to net zero will require both public and private investment, complemented by taxation, regulatory and behavioural change measures. In terms of Exchequer investment, the National Development Plan 2018 - 2027, which is currently being reviewed, allocated €30.4 billion for investment in climate action, while the Programme for Government commits to legislating to hypothecate all additional carbon tax revenue, estimated €9.5 billion over the next ten years, for climate action with a particular emphasis on ensuring a just transition. In addition, the EU's €750 billion Next Generation EU recovery package and €1 trillion budget require that money can only be spent on projects that meet certain green criteria, with 30% of all funding to go on climate change mitigation.

In terms of economic and Exchequer risk, it should be noted that failure to rapidly move to a carbon-neutral economic model will have far reaching negative impacts on the economy and the public finances; undermine the long-term, sustainable competitiveness of the economy; and lock Ireland into a redundant fossil-fuel based economic model. Embracing the transition will support further job creation through the development of new and emerging sectors. The green economy, including the retrofitting and renewable energy sector, the circular economy, clean mobility, green and blue infrastructure, sustainable agriculture and the bio-economy will create high quality employment opportunities that will be a source of significant employment growth over the coming decades, as well as supporting a stable tax base. In addition, failure to meet our legally binding EU targets could result in a cost to the Exchequer of up to €1.75 billion.

Climate Change Policy

185. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of progress made towards the Annual Transition Statement for 2020. [32703/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Annual Transition Statement (ATS), established under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, serves an important function in providing an overview of climate change mitigation and adaptation policy measures adopted to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and to adapt to the effects of climate change in order to enable the achievement of the national transition objective. In this regard, the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021, which will amend the 2015 Act, will significantly strengthen the statutory framework for governance of the climate challenge, and ensure delivery of successive Climate Action Plans and Long-term Climate Strategies, supported by a system of carbon budgeting and sectoral targets with appropriate oversight by Government, the Oireachtas and a new Climate Change Advisory Council.

The Bill will introduce greater accountability arrangements with an enhanced role for the Oireachtas – Ministers will have to give account for their performance towards sectoral targets and actions before an Oireachtas Committee each year replacing the current Annual Transition Statement process.

In accordance with the 2015 Act, I propose to prepare an Annual Transition Statement for 2020 which I intend to publish this year.

Departmental Schemes

186. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the breakdown of the cost per school for retrofits under the pathfinder scheme. [32705/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Public Sector Pathfinder Programme provides capital support to retrofit public buildings across a number of key sectors. The aim of the programme, which is administered by the SEAI, is to test technical solutions, retrofit delivery models and approaches to inform the development of a scalable retrofit model for the wider public sector and schools. The schools initiative within the programme is co-funded by my Department and the Department of Education and Skills. Since 2017, over €22.9 million has been invested in energy efficiency retrofits across 39 schools. The average cost per school was almost €600,000. For 2021, my Department has allocated a budget of €21 million for the programme, of which over €7 million is allocated for the schools initiative.

Further information on the supports available to public bodies and schools including the Public Sector Pathfinder Programme can be found at <https://www.seai.ie/business-and-public-sector/public-sector/public-sector-energy-programme/>.

Energy Policy

187. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of replacing the lapsed energy poverty strategy. [32707/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Overall, the Government envisages expenditure in excess of €700 million in 2021 on a number of measures to support households meeting the cost of energy. The Government's Strategy to Combat Energy Poverty was published in 2016. The Strategy set out several actions to alleviate the burden of energy poverty on the most vulnerable in society. The focus of the strategy was on high impact actions which aimed to make a real difference to the lives of those in energy poverty.

Good progress has been made under the strategy including:

- Free upgrades were carried out in over 23,000 lower income homes under the main Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) energy poverty retrofit schemes;
- A consultation on energy efficiency in the rented sector has also been completed which has informed changes to energy efficiency grant schemes with further recommendations to follow later this year;
- Funding for SEAI energy poverty retrofit schemes has increased dramatically over the period from €15 million in 2015 to over €109 million for 2021.
- The allocations for retrofit of social housing have also increased significantly with an allocation of €65 million for 2021.

Income supports from the Department of Social Protection to help households with the costs of heating their homes have also increased. The Minister for Social Protection provides an estimated €300 million in 2021 for a Fuel Allowance payment, of €28.00 per week for 28 weeks, which is a total of €784 each year, from October to April, to an average of 372,000 low

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

Research undertaken by the Economic and Social research Institute shows that the proportion of households in or at risk of energy poverty has reduced from 28% in 2015 to 17.5% in 2020. The Survey on Income and Living Conditions also shows that the proportion of people who report that they are unable to afford to keep the home adequately warm, has fallen from 9% in 2015 to 4.9% in 2019.

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

Departmental Policies

188. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will outline his key policy achievements in his Department since 27 June 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32716/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Programme for Government (PfG) sets out how the Government will respond and manage the challenge of decarbonising our economy and creating a sustainable future for all. It commits to a 7% emission reduction per annum from 2021 to 2030 and net-zero emission by 2050. It also commits to balanced regional development underpinned by a digitally connected society and transitioning to a circular economy. My Department published its Statement of Strategy for the period 2021-2023 in March of this year which sets out our strategic goals in line with the Programme for Government and our long-term vision of a climate neutral, sustainable and digitally connected Ireland. Since the second half of 2020, my Department has continued to progress the development and implementation of a wide range of policies and programmes across the breadth of its remit. Some of the main deliverables achieved in that timeframe include:

- The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021 is currently progressing through the Houses of the Oireachtas as priority legislation. This landmark bill will set Ireland on the path to net-zero emissions no later than 2050, and to a 51% reduction in emissions by the end of this decade.

- Progressing the Climate Action Plan to reflect the much higher PfG emissions reduction ambition. The updated Climate Action Plan will be published shortly.

- The establishment of the Climate Action Fund on a statutory basis, through the early enactment of the National Oil Reserves Agency Bill.

- The publication of the second progress report of the Just Transition Commissioner and the approval of the first tranches of funding from the Just Transition Fund.

- Regulations were finalised to extend the Smoky Coal ban to an additional 13 towns ban. In addition, a public consultation sought views on the further regulation of solid fuel use for domestic home heating earlier this year.

- The designation of SEAI as the National Retrofitting Delivery Body.
 - €221.5m secured for residential and community retrofit programmes in Budget 2021, the highest allocation ever to these programmes.
 - 82 new renewable energy projects received funding under the first Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS) auction. The RESS scheme will support an investment in Ireland of over €1.4 billion and support the recovery by creating roughly 1,000 jobs.
 - Published the framework for Ireland's Offshore Electricity Transmission System which will facilitate the expansion of offshore wind energy to help the country meet its greenhouse gas emissions targets.
 - The Government approved the Policy Statement on the Importation of Fracked Gas including a moratorium on the development of LNG import terminals pending the completion of review of security of supply.
 - Public consultations on the Community Benefit Fund for the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme, the Microgeneration Support Scheme and the Energy Efficiency Obligation Scheme have recently closed and the responses will inform the design of these initiatives.
 - Government approval was received to introduce legislation to ban licences for new oil and natural gas exploration. The legislation will be included in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021.
 - The establishment of a Circular Economy Unit within my Department.
 - The publication of a Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy.
 - Two public consultations were held on the introduction of a Deposit and Return Scheme, the most recent on the preferred model and legislative framework for the delivery of the scheme.
 - Continuing the rollout the National Broadband Plan Ireland to deliver NBP - design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across every county with nearly 223,000 premises surveyed and 322 Broadband Connection Point sites have been installed as of start June this year.
- My Department will continue to progress our priorities and Programme for Government commitments in 2021. The Department's Annual Report for 2021 will be published shortly.

Energy Infrastructure

189. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications further to Parliamentary Question No. 231 of 24 March 2021, when the report will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32731/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The report referred to by the Deputy has been published on my Department's website, and can be found at the following link: gov.ie - Potential extensions of the Natural Gas Network in Ireland (www.gov.ie). This study was undertaken in the context of the national climate and energy policies that were in place in 2018. In the period since, there has been significant development of national policy including the 2020 Programme for Government commitments to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030 (a 51% reduction over the decade) and to achieving net zero emissions by 2050. In this context, I consider the

2018 report to be of limited, if any, relevance to current policy development. Furthermore, I can confirm that extending the natural gas network will not be included in the upcoming Climate Action Plan as a means of decarbonisation.

Equality Issues

190. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit are working towards enabling access to employment for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities, including, but not limited to, persons with disabilities, persons from ethnic minorities, Travellers, Mincéirí; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32738/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department engages the services of the Public Appointments Service (PAS) who is the centralised provider of recruitment, assessment and selection services for the Irish Public and Civil Service. As the leading recruiter for the Civil and Public Service, PAS welcomes people with disabilities to apply for career opportunities on their website. PAS promote and support the development and employment of people with disabilities and promote diversity and inclusion throughout the Civil and Public Service. Under the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities for 2015 – 2024, the Government has committed to progressively increasing the statutory target for the employment of people with disabilities from 3% to a minimum of 6% in the public sector by 2024. The Department is continually working to ensure that it meets all commitments in this regard.

I have asked the aegis bodies under my Department to provide the information requested for their organisations directly to the Deputy.

National Broadband Plan

191. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the projected roll-out of the National Broadband Plan for counties Cavan and Monaghan for 2021; the measures that will be implemented to offset the delays that have occurred in this roll-out to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32791/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the over 544,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools. There are 42,335 premises in County Cavan of which 26,061 are in the commercial area and 16,274 premises are within the NBP Intervention Area. There are 33,465 premises in County Monaghan of which 18,133 are in the commercial area and 15,332 premises are within the NBP Intervention Area. I am advised by National Broadband Ireland that, as of 10 June 2021, over 225,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. In County Cavan, premises have been surveyed or surveys are ongoing in the areas of Ballinagh, Corlurgan, Araghan, Poles, Caughoo, Belturbet, Killashandra, Butler's Bridge, Ballylennon, Redhills, Gannons Cross, Derryheelan, Castlesaunderson, Townparks, Foalies Bridge, Riverrun and Erne Hill. Main works are ongoing outside Cavan town including Ballinagh, Corlurgan, Araghan, Poles, and Caughoo. In County Monaghan almost 70% of premises in the Intervention Area have been surveyed to date. Premises have been surveyed or surveys

are ongoing in the areas of Cornacassa, Cortolvin, Ballybay, Stranooden, Mullinahinch, Belanode, Drumhilock, Tydavnet, Cloughnart, Scotstown, Killymarley, Drumcru, Stonebridge, Tiernahinch, Clones, Annalore, Kileevan, Drumullan, Newbliss, Cumber, Scotshouse, Clonowla, Clonagore and Clonooney.

Main works have commenced in the Monaghan Deployment Area which covers approximately 4,355 premises. This includes the areas of Ballagh, Stranodden, Drumloo, Aghaboy, Kilcorran, Annagola, Brookvale, Cloghernagh, Feebane, Gortakeeghan, Mullandavagh and Selloo. NBI anticipates that these premises will be passed and available for connection later this year. I am advised by NBI that, as of 10 June, nearly 4,400 homes are passed and available for connection to the NBI high speed broadband in Counties Cork and Cavan. Some 3,580 premises are passed and are available for connection in County Cavan. A further 15,000 premises can also pre-order via Retail Service Providers (RSPs) in Counties Cork, Cavan, Galway and Limerick and get a connection in the coming months.

While substantial progress has been made to date, the Covid 19 pandemic has had an impact on the delivery of the fibre network resulting in delays on delivery of aspects of the programme. Impacts include challenges with mobilisation of key contractors with restrictions on operations, supply chain and logistic delays (both nationally and internationally), as well as the recruitment of key personnel as NBI and its contractors scale, up including challenges associated with onboarding and training people. Inevitably, like many other organisations, NBI and contractor staff are at risk of contracting Covid 19 or may have to restrict their movements as a result of being a close contact posing further challenges. My Department has worked closely with NBI to put in place a remedial plan under the Contract to address the impacts of the Covid 19 pandemic on the project.

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

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of 10 June, 325 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible locations and the Department of Education for schools. BCPs installed with high speed publicly accessible broadband in County Cavan include Templeport Community Centre, Kildallan Parish Hall, Mullahoran Community Centre, Drumavaddy Community Centre, Glengevlin Community Hall, Gallonray House, Castlerahan Community Centre, Cornafean Community Centre, Bunnoe Community Centre, Castle Sanderson Scout Centre, Killenkere Leisure Centre. BCPs installed in County Monaghan include Tullycorbet Parish Hall, Corcaghan Community Centre, Monaghan GAA Centre Of Excellence, Mullyash Community Centre, Tannagh Outdoor Education Centre, Ballybay Wetlands, Carn Resource Centre, Latton Resource Centre, Saint Alphonsus Community Hall, Corduff Community Centre and St. Patrick's Accommodation Centre.

Corlea National School, Laragh National School, Kildallan National School, Saint Patrick's School and Greaghrahan National School are installed in County Cavan as part of this initiative. Annalitten National School, Connons National School, Drumcorrin National School, Drumgosatt National School, Saint Mary's School and Saint Brigid's National School are installed in

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

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

192. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Transport if he will report on the sector specific supports for the aviation sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32547/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): As the Deputy has previously been advised, in recognition of the very difficult circumstances facing the aviation sector, the Government announced a funding package for Irish aviation last November.

The following outlines the total package of sector-specific supports available to aviation in 2021:

[table1]

Following the evaluation of projects submitted for capital funding under both the Regional Airports Programme 2021-2025 and the Covid-19 Regional State Airports Programme 2021, I was pleased to announce, on 19th April 2021, the allocation of over €11 million in Exchequer funding to regional airports as follows:

Grant Aid	Airport	Capital Grant Allocations
Regional Airports Programme 2021-2025	Donegal Airport	€0.9m
	Ireland West Airport	€2.2m
	Kerry Airport	€1.7m
Covid-19 Regional State Airports Programme 2021	Shannon Airport	€6.3m
TOTAL FUNDING ANNOUNCED TO DATE		€11.1m

The allocation to Shannon Airport, which will support the delivery of a broad range of projects at the airport, is in addition to €6.1 million already approved for a significant Hold Baggage Screening project for the airport in 2020.

Furthermore, an application for funding in respect of a runway overlay project at Cork Airport is currently being assessed. Pending a satisfactory evaluation, I hope to be in a position to formally approve funding, in the region of €10 million, for this project in the coming weeks.

In addition to the above capital funding, airports will also be invited to apply for operational supports, under these Programmes, later in the year.

In relation to funding under the Covid-19 Supplementary Support Scheme, applications are currently being assessed by my Department and it is anticipated that funding will be dispersed in the coming weeks.

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, the Government has made significant funding available to the Irish aviation industry through a range of business supports. The bulk of the support to airlines is through the TWSS/EWSS wage subsidy schemes which were specifically designed

to maintain the link between employers and employees. It is estimated that by end-June 2021, the sector will have received approximately €300 million in such supports. In addition, liquidity support has also been made available to the aviation industry through the ISIF Pandemic Stabilisation Fund. Aer Lingus has already secured a €150m loan under this fund.

Aviation Industry

193. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Transport the status of two submissions made on behalf of former employees of the Irish Aviation Authority regarding changes in their superannuation scheme; when his Department will be in a position to make a response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [19322/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): Section 41 (7) of the Irish Aviation Authority Act, 1993 provides that a dispute in respect of superannuation benefit may be submitted to the Minister for Transport for determination by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

I can confirm that two such submissions have been received by my Department on behalf of staff of the Irish Aviation Authority. These appeals are now with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform in accordance with the statutory process and officials are engaging on those appeals.

As the appeal process is ongoing, I am not in a position to comment further at this point.

Electric Vehicles

194. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the roll-out of electric vehicle charging points; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [29417/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Deputy will be aware that the Government is fully committed to supporting a significant expansion and modernisation of the electric vehicle charging network over the coming years.

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

- 90 additional high power chargers, each capable of charging two vehicles
- 52 additional fast chargers, which may replace existing standard chargers
- 264 replacement standard chargers with more modern technology and with each consisting of two charge points

The project is due to be completed in 2022.

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

While several private operators such as Tesla, Ioney & EasyGO are involved in providing charging infrastructure, my Department does not hold information on the location of charging infrastructure which has been installed without government support. I am aware, however, that ESB has partnered with Tesco Ireland to install 22kW Standard AC Chargers at a number of

Tesco locations around the country. More than 50 of these are planned in total.

My Department is also making €2 million available this year through the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) to support the installation of destination charge points in locations such as hotels and parks. This new initiative will help provide another critical link in the overall network for public charging.

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

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

Work is currently being progressed to expand the EV home charger grant to include shared parking in apartment blocks and similar developments. However, there are a number of complex planning issues to address before we can expand the grant in an appropriate manner so as to include the required categories of shared parking. My Department is working closely with the SEAI and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to address the issues.

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

Departmental Contracts

195. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Transport the process under which sea air rescue services are intended to be procured in 2023; if there is a review into the operation of the previous contracts; if the Defence Forces will have a role in its future operations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25106/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The procurement process for the new Search and Rescue Aviation service has commenced in compliance with the Public Spending Code. The current status of the process can be referenced in the Published eTenders update on eTenders and a dedicated page on Gov.ie (SAR Webpage). This is an on-going deliberative process which will ultimately lead to a Government decision so I am limited in what I can say in relation to this at the moment.

The process itself commenced in November 2019 with the establishment of a Steering Group in my Department under the Chair of the Director of the Irish Coast Guard and a variety of state stakeholders including other Government Departments and agencies with an interest in the SAR aviation service. This was with a view to ensuring a whole of Government approach

to the management of this process.

A first key step was to prepare a Strategic Assessment and Preliminary Appraisal. This went to Government in July 2020. This document included a strategic assessment setting out the context for SAR aviation programme, an organisational overview, and a survey of existing policies and strategies relevant to the programme. It identified the spending objectives of the programme including existing arrangements and relevant business needs. It also included an appraisal of various service delivery options, including where the state assumed full responsibility for the service, either through the Air Corps or a dedicated IRCG Aviation Branch.

While it was accepted that the Air Corps could not assume responsibility for this service on the basis of that initial assessment, my Department was requested in November of 2020 by the Department of Defence to consider the viability of the Air Corps providing some element of the IRCG's aviation service. This consideration is being done as part of the detailed business case currently being prepared by KPMG along with all other viable options for the delivery of this vital service.

The outcome of the business case will go to Government over the Summer and it is expected that a tender will issue shortly thereafter. Regardless of the outcome of this process, the Defence Forces will continue to play a vital partnership role in the delivery of Search and Rescue services for the State working closely with the Irish Coast Guard.

Aviation Industry

196. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Transport if he will intervene and engage with a company (details supplied) to ensure that no worker at Cork airport will be laid off for ten weeks at the end of 2021. [30185/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The temporary closure of Aer Lingus's crew base at Cork Airport aligns with the airports planned closure to carry out construction works on its main runway and associated infrastructure. In addition to the announced lay offs for the period, the airline also reported that they will be seeking a number of redundancies. The airline has indicated that such immediate actions and wider structural changes are to address the impact that COVID-19 has had.

Aer Lingus has stated that it will emerge from the pandemic as a smaller airline, and the temporary closure of their crew base at Cork Airport and the laying off of a number of their staff is a commercial decision for them. Both Minister Ryan and I met with their CEO soon after their announcement, and they did confirm that there is no strategic intent to reduce connectivity at Cork Airport, but that the restoration of air services would depend on market conditions.

The Government has now set out its plan for the resumption of non-essential international air travel, scheduled to begin on 19 July. This plan is built around EU Digital COVID Certificates and other proofs of vaccination, pre-departure PCR testing and mandatory quarantine that will allow international travel to operate safely. An "emergency brake" mechanism will also allow us to respond to the potential emergence of variants of concern.

While it may take some time for our aviation sector to regain the strong economic position it had at the start of the pandemic, Government has committed to ensuring that there will be no "cliff-edge" to the COVID-19 related business supports that are currently available.

Question No. 197 answered with Question No. 13.

Road Projects

198. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Transport the progress being made with the N5 Ballaghaderreen to Scramoge Road project given that it should form a key part of the mid-term review of the National Development Plan 2018-2027; when the project will reach final approval; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31759/21]

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. TII ultimately delivers the National Roads Programme in line with Project Ireland 2040, the National Planning Framework and the NDP.

The N5 Ballaghaderreen to Scramoge Road project received Government approval to proceed with the award of the main construction contract on 9 June, 2021. Construction is expected to commence this year.

If you require any further details, TII would be best placed to advise you.

Question No. 199 answered with Question No. 65.

Air Safety

200. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the action that can be taken to prevent the hijacking of aircraft and passengers en route between two EU states. [29217/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The goal of the global aviation security system is to safeguard civil aviation against acts of unlawful interference including, inter alia, hijackings. The specialised UN agency, the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) formulates and adopts Standards and Recommended Practices to prevent and suppress all acts of unlawful interference against civil aviation throughout the world and these are set out in Annex 17 to the Convention on International Civil Aviation (also known as the Chicago Convention).

In order to protect persons and goods within the European Union, EU Regulation 300 of 2008 sets out to prevent acts of unlawful interference against civil aviation by establishing common rules for safeguarding civil aviation and provides the basis for a common interpretation of Annex 17 to the Chicago Convention.

My Department sets out the requirements on air carriers, airports, and other regulated entities in the National Civil Aviation Security Programme (NCASP), based on EU and ICAO legislation. Measures undertaken to prevent hijacking include passenger and cabin baggage screening, security awareness training and background checks for all relevant staff.

The Irish Aviation Authority (IAA) is responsible for oversight of civil aviation security in Ireland. This includes inspections and audits of airports, air carriers, cargo companies, airport suppliers and suppliers of in-flight services. My Department receives regular reports on the results of these oversight activities.

As noted, the aviation security system is global and is intended to ensure the safety of the travelling public irrespective of their point of departure.

Rail Network

201. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the 41 new diesel ICR carriages ordered by Irish Rail in 2020 and the 2020 tender process to order up to 600 electric and hybrid battery carriages and their planned use on the Maynooth rail line; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32541/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Transport Minister, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the development and delivery of public transport infrastructure in the Greater Dublin Area including, in consultation with Iarnród Éireann, development of the railway network and the purchase of rolling stock. Such stock includes both the 41 ICRs and, as part of the DART+ Programme, the electric/battery-electric carriages referenced by the Deputy.

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

Covid-19 Pandemic

202. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Transport if he will report on the potential for funding for the subsidisation of children's PCR and antigen testing inbound and outbound at airports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32550/21]

203. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Transport if he will make funding available to enable PCR and antigen testing at airports in line with the digital Covid certificate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32551/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 202 and 203 together.

All persons who have been overseas in the 14 days prior to entering Ireland (apart from those arriving from designated states who are subject to mandatory hotel quarantine) are required by law to quarantine at home for 14 days, and are requested to arrange a COVID-19 Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) test to be taken at least 5 days after arrival in Ireland.

This test is free of charge and is available at testing centres operated at locations around the country by the Health Service Executive (HSE). The test should be booked in advance of arrival in Ireland and must be booked for a date at least 5 days after arrival. Those who travel from Great Britain, who are not fully vaccinated are now requested to remain in quarantine and seek a further test at least 10 days after arrival in Ireland, in addition to the day 5 test. This day 10 test is also free of charge. A test can be booked by visiting the HSE Test Booking website.

They are currently no plans to make funding available for testing at the Airports for outbound passengers. Testing is already provided at the Airports and locations all around the country by a number of private providers.

Aviation Industry

204. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Transport if he will report on the capital expenditure and operational expenditure supports for 2022 for Cork and Shannon airports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32557/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): As the Deputy will be aware, in recognition of the significant challenges being faced by Cork and Shannon airports, the Government established a Covid19 Regional State Airports Programme earlier this year. This is providing both capital and operational supports to these airports in 2021 with an available budget of €32.1m.

Furthermore, on 24 February 2021, my Department secured European Commission approval for a €26 million funding scheme for Irish Airports. As part of this scheme, a €20m damages measure has been established to support State airports, including Cork and Shannon. My Department is currently assessing applications for funding by airports under this Scheme and aid will be disbursed on a proportionate basis, relative to the level of damage incurred.

The Government understands that Irish aviation faces a long and difficult path to recovery, and that continued support will be necessary. The Government is fully committed to supporting the aviation sector, and we recognise the importance of providing clarity on the extent and duration of supports beyond 2021. In this context, Government will consider what further supports may be needed to help all regional airports, including Cork and Shannon, as part of the upcoming Estimates process.

Rail Network

205. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport his views on whether the Public Spending Code requires that the Metrolink Preliminary Business Case to Beechwood, which has been submitted to Government by the NTA, cannot be approved until the main alternative option (details supplied) has been appraised. [32594/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I think it important to set out what are two different processes currently underway both of which relate to the potential future development of metro in Dublin.

Firstly, we have the project known as MetroLink. This is a project set out in the existing, statutory, *Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area 2016 to 2036* and one which has been subject to extensive, non-statutory public consultation over the last 3 years. This project has now reached an important milestone as its Preliminary Business Case has been submitted to my Department for review as is required under the *Public Spending Code*. For projects of this scale, the *Public Spending Code* stipulates that Government approval is required to allow the project submit its Railway Order application to An Bord Pleanála. The Preliminary Business Case has been developed on the basis of the existing project as has been subject to public consultation in recent years. The Preferred Route for MetroLink is available to view on the dedicated project website, www.metrolink.ie.

Secondly, we have the statutory review of the *Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area*. The Dublin Transport Authority Act 2008 stipulates that the *Strategy* must be reviewed

every six years and this review provides an opportunity to re-examine and re-consider proposals for inclusion in the revised Strategy. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has stated that, as part of its review, it is considering whether additional metro routes should be included in any revised *Strategy*. I understand this public consultation phase will commence in the coming months.

Inclusion in any revised *Strategy* is the first step in what is a very detailed and often lengthy process to enable projects move from the strategic support, enabled by inclusion in a *Transport Strategy*, to being a project with a Preliminary Business Case seeking approval to enter the statutory planning process.

Public Transport

206. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport if further consideration has been given to the introduction of a three-day week taxsaver commuter ticket in view of the clear and evident change in working patterns over the past year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32596/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport, nor decisions on fares.

Following the establishment of the National Transport Authority (NTA) in December 2009, the NTA has responsibility for the regulation of fares charged to passengers in respect of public transport services, provided under public service obligation (PSO) contracts.

In relation to the possible introduction of a part-time tax saver commuter ticket following the Covid pandemic, my Department recently commenced discussions with the NTA and the Department of Finance, in order to obtain approval for the implementation of a more flexible Taxsaver product. The NTA is proceeding with the detailed technical work required for this purpose, whilst discussions continue.

Question No. 207 answered with Question No. 46.

Driver Test

208. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport if he will clarify a matter (details supplied) regarding driver theory tests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32601/21]

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 Driving Test. The information requested is held by the Authority.

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 Expenditure

209. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Transport the amount his Department and

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associated agencies have spent on social media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32623/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department has incurred no expenditure relating to social media advertising within the timeframe stipulated by the Deputy.

I have referred your request to the relevant agencies under the aegis of my Department for their direct response.

Departmental Expenditure

210. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Transport the amount his Department has spent on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32640/21]

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

Timeframe	Description	Amount Spent
May 2021	Production of still and animated graphics for social media communications around Ireland's presidency of the International Transport Forum.	€730.62 (incl VAT)
April – June 2021	Purchase of stock imagery for various Departmental communications on Twitter.	€71.34 (incl VAT)

In general, social media content is developed in-house by my Department's press office team. When external services are required, my Department has always endeavoured to ensure value for money and to keep expenditure to the minimum necessary.

Departmental Expenditure

211. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Transport the amount his Department and all associated agencies have spent on public relations consultancy costs since January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32657/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department has not entered into any contracts for public relations advice or consultancy within the timeframe stipulated by the Deputy.

I have referred your request to the relevant agencies under the aegis of my Department for their direct response.

Ports Policy

212. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the Port of Dublin is not accepting container trains to and from the west of Ireland; if, he plans speaking to the board and management of the port in relation to this matter in view of the fact that container trains are the most environmentally efficient way of carrying these goods; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32673/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): There has been significant additional shipping services direct to the continent from Ireland as a result of Brexit. In February 2020, there were 12 weekly sailings to Northern France from Ireland, there are now approximately 40 sailings to Northern France from a number of Irish

ports. There has also been a level of modal shift from traditional RoRo to LoLo freight direct to the continent.

Dublin Port is the largest and busiest port in the State serving the trading needs of Ireland with on average 70% of all vessels visits and over 50% of all tonnage handled by ports in Ireland.

It is understood that due to the significant increases in LoLo shipping services direct from Dublin Port to the continent, there have been some capacity constraints at one of the privately run terminals in Dublin port that caters to both LoLo and rail freight. As a result, this has impacted on rail freight services into the Port.

It is understood that the stakeholders involved, Doyle Shipping Group, its client IWT, Irish Rail and Dublin Port are currently engaging to explore how to resolve these issues. I encourage all parties to constructively engage to ensure the continuation of rail freight into Dublin Port.

Driver Test

213. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport when a person (details supplied) in County Kerry will be given a date for a driving test; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32683/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The driving test is the statutory responsibility of the Road Safety Authority.

Individual cases are a matter for the Authority and the question in relation to this case is being referred to it for direct reply.

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

Climate Action Plan

214. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Transport the current and capital costs involved with each action item in the Interim Climate Action Plan under his Department's responsibility. [32691/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Preliminary Business Cases for the three Transport Mega Projects (BusConnects, Metrolink and DART+) are currently being considered in line with the Public Spending Code and therefore, my Department is not in a position to itemise costs per Action for those associated Actions.

In relation to Action 96 - 'Conduct all-island strategic rail review', the review is currently subject to an ongoing procurement process.

It should be noted that while there may be limited costs associated with conducting and publishing certain studies, delivering on subsequent actions/recommendations may incur significant capital/current costs as yet determined.

Below in tabular format are the costs (where applicable) associated with each item under the Interim CAP which fall under the Department of Transport's responsibility.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumenta-

tion/2021-06-17_pq214-17-06-21_en.docx">costs]

The current and capital costs of Action 123 is a matter for Gas Networks Ireland which falls under the aegis of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications.

In relation to the remaining Actions, I have referred your question to the agencies under the aegis of my Department for direct reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Departmental Policies

215. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will outline his key policy achievements in his Department since 27 June 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32727/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I am very happy that significant progress has been made in all policy areas of my Department since 27 June 2020 and I believe that we are well on track to deliver on the Programme for Government commitments in all areas. I am especially pleased that we have been able to make such good progress while dealing with the unprecedented challenge of the COVID pandemic and the very significant challenges that Brexit has also posed over this period. At the same time, we have made significant progress in the area of sustainable mobility and cycling and walking provision.

As the Deputy is aware, my Department has a very broad remit and is responsible for a large number of significant projects and programmes. Therefore, I have asked my officials to compile a comprehensive update on the achievements of the Department over the last year, which will be forwarded to the Deputy within 10 working days.

Equality Issues

216. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit are working towards enabling access to employment for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities, including, but not limited to, persons with disabilities, persons from ethnic minorities, Travellers, Mincéirí; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32749/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Department of Transport engages the services of the Public Appointments Service (PAS). PAS is the centralised provider of recruitment, assessment and selection services for the Irish Public and Civil Service.

As the leading recruiter for the Civil and Public Service, PAS welcomes people with from all communities to apply for career opportunities. PAS promotes and supports the development and employment of people with disabilities and promotes diversity and inclusion throughout the Civil and Public Service.

All recruitment and selection processes both within my Department and those undertaken by PAS on my Department’s behalf are arranged in accordance with the CPSA Codes of Practice and in compliance with the Employment Equality Acts.

Furthermore, my Department’s Human Resources Development strategy, launched in February 2020 has a strong focus on diversity and inclusion. Strategic priorities derived from this include actively promoting inclusion and diversity through initiatives such as Disability Net-

works.

I have asked the aegis bodies under my Department to provide the information requested for their organisations directly to the Deputy.

Questions Nos. 217 and 218 answered with Question No. 23.

Rail Network

219. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which he expects commuter rail passenger numbers to increase when the lines are upgraded; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32759/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): We need to provide sustainable alternatives to the private car if we are to encourage people to make the shift to more sustainable modes of transport and expanded rail capacity has a role to play in that regard.

We know from experience that the public responds positively when additional capacity is provided as part of an overall strategic and well-planned framework. The high-level strategic context, including passenger demand and forecasted modal share, for all of our commuter rail networks is set out in their relevant metropolitan area transport strategies which are all available online. At a project-level forecasted passenger demand is obviously a key component of the development of the business cases.

As an example, the Preliminary Business Case for DART+ has recently been received by my Department and is under review as required under the Public Spending Code. As the Deputy is aware DART+ proposes DART level all-day services across the network from Drogheda on the Northern Line, Maynooth on Western Line, Hazelhatch on the South Western Line and Greystones on the South Eastern Line and will result in a doubling of capacity as a result.

Another project underway at the moment is the addition of 41 rail carriages to the Greater Dublin Area rail fleet. These carriages are under construction at the moment and will start to arrive next year and will add around 34% capacity to the system as compared to before.

I have no doubt that the passenger response to this additional capacity will be as strong as it has been in the past where we have invested in our public transport network.

Rail Network

220. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport if he is satisfied regarding the adequacy of health and safety adherence for the north County Kildare commuter rail passengers given the necessity to remain standing for some journeys; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32760/21]

221. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to increase the number of carriages serving the north County Kildare rail commuter routes or alternatively increasing the frequency of trains thereby improving the service for commuters; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32761/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 220 and 221 together.

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

The issues raised are an operational matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA), in conjunction with Iarnród Éireann, and I have forwarded the Deputy's questions to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Question No. 221 answered with Question No. 220.

Aviation Industry

222. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which he expects to be in a position to assist the aviation sector post-Covid given the pressures experienced by airlines in recent times; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32762/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The Irish aviation sector is critical to Ireland's economic development, as it is a key enabler of international trade and business, including foreign direct investment and tourism. For this reason, our aviation policy places a priority on international connectivity. The sector is experiencing the most challenging crisis in its history, with many analysts predicting that it will take several years for it to return to 2019 levels of activity.

My officials and I have maintained regular contact with key stakeholders throughout this crisis, and Government has put in place a range of supports for businesses, including the aviation sector. These supports include the wage subsidy scheme, waiving of commercial rates, deferral of tax liabilities, the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme, the Credit Guarantee Scheme, and the SBCI Working Capital Scheme. Liquidity funding is also available through the ISIF Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund for medium and large enterprises. It is estimated that, by the end of June this year, our airlines and airports will have received at least €300 million from several available supports.

In November 2020 the Government agreed a revised funding package of €80 million specifically for Irish aviation for 2021. €21 million is being provided under the Regional Airports Programme (2021-2025). This gives funding certainty to Donegal, Kerry and Ireland West Airport Knock and supports domestic PSO routes from Dublin Airport to Donegal and Kerry. €32 million is being provided to Cork and Shannon Airports through a new one-year COVID-19 Regional State Airports Programme. A €26 million, European Commission approved, Irish State Aid scheme to compensate airport operators for the losses caused by COVID-19 and the travel restrictions imposed by Ireland to limit its spread. The scheme will augment the supports already in place and help the industry to maintain connectivity and recover from the impact of COVID-19.

Such supports and schemes notwithstanding, all service providers in the sector, apart from those substantially or exclusively dedicated to air cargo, have had no option but to radically address their cost base and seek to safeguard liquidity. Alongside rationalisation measures, the major service providers are shoring up their finances through increased borrowings or raising new capital.

Several public health measures have been introduced in relation to international travel, which have developed and evolved as the pandemic has progressed, with the objective of both limiting the spread of COVID-19 and limiting the presence of its variants of concern in Ireland.

The main requirement of all aviation stakeholders has been clarity from Government on a plan to permit the resumption of non-essential international air travel, and the Government outlined such a plan on 28 May, which is scheduled to begin on 19 July. This plan brings together the EU Digital COVID Certificates, pre-departure PCR testing, mandatory quarantine, and our public health measures so that international travel can operate safely. An “emergency brake” mechanism will also allow us to respond to the potential emergence of variants of concern.

While it may take some time for our aviation sector to regain the strong economic position it had at the start of the pandemic, Government has committed to ensuring that there will be no “cliff-edge” to the COVID-19 related business supports that are currently available. On 1 June, Government launched its Economic Recovery Plan 2021 with the goal of achieving rapid job creation and economic growth after the pandemic. This plan sets out new measures for businesses and affected sectors as the economy reopens, and details for existing emergency pandemic financial supports including the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), giving certainty to employers, workers, and for those who need it most.

With our vaccination programme progressing, a plan for the resumption of non-essential international travel ready and significant levels of business supports available, aviation is now positioned to begin to recover.

Covid-19 Pandemic

223. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport if the use of high quality air purifiers has been considered as a means of reducing the potential spread of Covid-19 throughout the transport sector including air, rail and bus transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32763/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport.

The continued operation of public transport services has been a priority throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. The National Transport Authority (NTA) is working closely with all transport operators to ensure that public transport services continue to operate in a safe manner during the crisis.

Public transport services have continued to operate safely over the course of this pandemic and operators have taken heed of all public health requirements. This has included the mandatory wearing of face coverings, social distancing measures onboard services, as well as an enhanced daily cleaning regime across the transport fleet. In addition, transport operators have added signage on the windows of vehicles where windows can be opened asking customers to leave them open. Operators are continuing to research ways in which public transport can provide as safe and reliable an environment as possible. Additional cleaning techniques are being researched and air conditioning systems, where installed, are being checked regularly to ensure they are operating as intended. The NTA and transport operators will continue to observe all public health advice relating to Covid-19.

In relation to air travel, the quality of air provided during a flight is very high. This is due to frequent exchange of air (the entire air supply is typically exchanged every 3-5 minutes) and

High-Efficiency Particulate Arrestor (HEPA) filters which are used on board most modern aircraft. It is my understanding that HEPA filters have been installed in all modern commercial jet aircraft for many years. For example, Airbus indicate they have been installed on new Airbus aircraft since 1994. Through communication at the National Air Transport Facilitation Committee, I understand that both the Ryanair and Aer Lingus fleets are all fitted with HEPA filters.

The European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) and European Centre for Disease Prevention & Control (ECDC) guidelines address the scenario where aircraft do not have HEPA filters. It states that aeroplane operators using aircraft without HEPA filters avoid the use of cabin air recirculation entirely, provided it is confirmed that this will not compromise any safety critical functions (e.g. avionics cooling, cabin pressurisation etc.).

I wish to highlight that the air quality on aircraft is just one of a suite of measures that can ensure passengers are safe, and not exposed to the COVID-19 virus while flying, as set out in the ECDC and EASA guidance.

Covid-19 Pandemic

224. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport if he remains satisfied that travel reduction targets for the transport sector in general continues to be attainable; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32764/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally.

On 10 May 2021, the capacity restrictions on public transport were increased from 25% to 50% of onboard capacity (sitting and standing) across all services, under updated measures announced by the Government. Public transport has also now largely returned to normal scheduling.

The Government recently agreed, that the ending of the 50% capacity restriction on public transport will be considered for August, subject to the epidemiological situation at the time.

My Department and the NTA continue to be guided by public health advice and are closely monitoring public transport demand.

Transport Policy

225. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which he remains satisfied regarding the adequacy of capital investment in the transport sector for the foreseeable future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32766/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy is aware, the National Development Plan (NDP) is under review and discussions are ongoing in relation to finalising the review and agreeing a new NDP setting out the overall capital investment envelope to 2030.

My approach to this review has been based around the sort of outcomes I want to see this NDP deliver –

- I would like this NDP set the groundwork for the fundamental change in the nature of

transport in Ireland as committed to in the Programme for Government.

- I want to see this NDP support the investment needed to support the National Planning Framework, particularly in terms of supporting balanced regional development and supporting compact growth in the five cities.

- And finally, my view is that this NDP needs to set us on our way to reduce emissions in line with our 2030 and ultimately 2050 ‘net zero’ commitments.

Our ability to deliver on those outcomes will be determined by the capital investment allocations we receive for the transport sector as part of the review, but my approach to the review has been framed by these considerations.

Greenways Provision

226. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the progress made to date on establishing a greenway from Leixlip to Maynooth along the royal canal; if he will provide the amount funded and or granted to that section in 2021; and if he will confirm if that section will be designated as an official greenway on the Dublin to Galway national cycle route. [32783/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I am pleased to inform the Deputy that Kildare County Council are progressing the section of the Royal Canal Greenway between Maynooth and Leixlip, through funding administered by the National Transport Authority (NTA). An allocation of €3,750,000 has been granted for the project in 2021. The design phase of the project is nearing completion and it is anticipated that the tenders for the construction contract will be sought in the coming months with construction to begin in Q4 2021.

In relation to the second part of the Deputy’s question, the Royal Canal Greenway will be part of the Dublin to Galway route as far as Mullingar where the Old Rail Trail will take it to Athlone. The Royal Canal Greenway from Maynooth in Kildare to Cloondara in Longford opened on 21 March 2021, and the Old Rail Trail has been opened for some time. Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) have recently been engaging in public consultations with a view to progressing the Dublin-Galway Greenway from Athlone to Galway and are managing the project that will take it across the Shannon at Athlone and onto Galway.

Aviation Industry

227. **Deputy Darren O’Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the estimated cost of providing a rebate directly to airlines of all Dublin Airport charges and air navigation charges as recommended in the Taskforce for Aviation Recovery report from July 2020. [32793/21]

228. **Deputy Darren O’Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the estimated cost of providing a common fixed amount per passenger to regional airports; as recommended in the Taskforce for Aviation Recovery report from July 2020. [32801/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 227 and 228 together.

I can advise the Deputy that to put the cost of the type of rebate recommended by the Taskforce for Aviation Recovery into context, Dublin Airport revenue from passenger charges in 2019 was €307m with the average price per passenger of €9.18. The Commission for Aviation

Regulation (CAR) set the price cap at €9.30 for 2019.

For 2020 and 2021 the CAR set the price cap per passenger at €7.50. If passenger numbers this year are in line with those in 2020 (7.4m passengers) - the costs could be in the region of €55m for 2021 if a full rebate was applied for this year.

Furthermore, I can advise the Deputy that from June 2020 to June 2021, the IAA invoiced airlines terminal charges of €6.2 million. These air navigation charges are attributable to aircraft landing/taking off at Dublin, Cork and Shannon airports (Terminal charges only).

In response to the recommendations of the Taskforce, Government put in place an €80m aviation support package which was announced on 10 November. This package includes €21.3 million for the Regional Airports Programme and €32.1 million for a new COVID-19 Regional State Airports Programme. Under these Programmes, the airports of Donegal, Kerry, Knock, Cork and Shannon will have access to capital and operational supports in 2021.

Following consultation with the European Commission, State aid Schemes to the value of €26 million to compensate airport operators for the losses caused by the COVID-19 pandemic were established. These schemes include compensation for State airports (Dublin, Cork and Shannon) of approximately €20 million, in light of Covid impacts in 2020. This funding Scheme was considered the most appropriate and State aid compliant way to provide State airports with flexibility to roll out route incentives/charge rebates, in consultation with airlines, with a view to supporting recovery and growth of connectivity.

The Department is currently assessing applications for this funding and would hope to be in a position to disburse this compensation in the coming weeks. In order to ensure parity of treatment, funding will be allocated proportionately in line with 2019 passenger numbers at the airports.

In addition, up to €6 million is also available to regional airports that provide connectivity (Knock, Kerry and Donegal) under the EU Temporary Framework in recognition of the impact of COVID on their business. Applications for funding under this measure are also currently being assessed and it is hoped that aid will be granted in the coming weeks.

Throughout the COVID-19, the Government has made significant funding available to the Irish aviation industry through a range of business supports. The bulk of the support to airlines is through the TWSS/EWSS wage subsidy schemes which were specifically designed to maintain the link between employers and employees. It is estimated that by end-June 2021, the sector will have received approximately €300 million in such supports. In addition, liquidity support has also been made available to the aviation industry through the ISIF Pandemic Stabilisation Fund. Aer Lingus has secured a €150m loan under this fund.

Question No. 228 answered with Question No. 227.

Road Network

229. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Transport if the level of funding awarded to Tipperary County Council will be increased ahead of the next three year roadworks programme in order to assist the Council's roads development to promptly improve the road network which has been ranked as 29th out of 31 local authorities by the National Oversight and Audit Commission for road condition. [30932/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The improvement and maintenance of re-

gional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority, in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from local authorities' own resources supplemented by State road grants, where applicable.

I announced the 2021 regional and local road allocations earlier this year and all grant funding available to my Department has now been allocated.

There were major cutbacks in funding for the road network in general during the post 2008 recession. The National Development Plan (NDP), as it stands, provides for a gradual increase in funding for regional and local roads and there has been a significant increase in Exchequer funding particularly in the last four years. In this context, Tipperary County Council received a total allocation of €29,526,858 for 2021 which is an increase of approximately 60% when compared to 2017.

Funding is not yet at the level needed for the adequate maintenance and renewal of regional and local roads and so for this reason, the primary focus for capital investment continues to be the maintenance and renewal of the network with some limited investment in road improvement projects.

As regards the basis for allocating grants, within the budget available to the Department, funding is allocated on as fair and equitable a basis as possible to eligible local authorities. In this context, grants in the main grant categories are allocated based on the length of the road network within a local authority's area of responsibility with some account taken of traffic. It is envisaged that grants will continue to be made available on that basis.

Basing regional and local roads grant allocations on road conditions could result in an uneven distribution of State funding. For example, local authorities that allocate higher levels of own resources funding to regional and local roads will have a larger proportion of roads with a higher condition rating than those with lower levels of own resources funding. Basing allocations on road condition could therefore disincentivise local authorities from allocating own resources funding to roads maintenance.

The Department appreciates that, within the overall parameters set for the grant programme, local authorities might need to target funding at particular problem areas and there is sufficient flexibility in the structure of the grant programme to allow for this. It is also open to each local authority to allocate its own resources to priority areas. In this context the Department has supported the development of a road asset management system for regional and local roads – MapRoad - to provide the data needed for each local authority to manage its network as effectively as possible, including the prioritisation of works for inclusion in its maintenance and renewal works programme. The road pavement condition information generated by the MapRoad system forms the basis for the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) performance reports each year.

My Department will be issuing a Circular shortly to local authorities regarding the preparation and submission of the next 3 year 2022 -2024 Restoration Improvement Programme.

Departmental Expenditure

230. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Finance the amount his Department and associated agencies have spent on social media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32613/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I can inform the Deputy that the De-

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partment of Finance has no record of spending on social media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021.

A number of bodies under the aegis of my Department have incurred expenditure on social media advertising since January 2021, the details are as follows:

The Central Bank of Ireland has paid €66,405 (VAT excl.) since the beginning of January 2021 for recruitment advertisements.

The Credit Review Office has incurred expenditure of €1,875 (VAT excl.) in relation to social media advertising since the start of January 2021.

The National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA) has incurred expenditure totalling €11,546 (VAT incl.) since January 2021 to date.

Home Building Finance Ireland (HBFI), the National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) and the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) are also bodies under my Department's aegis. As part of a shared services agreement, HBFI, NAMA and the SBCI reimburse the NTMA in respect of recruitment advertising costs attributable to them and any such spend is accounted for in the cost provided above.

In addition the SBCI has spent €100 (VAT excl.) since January 2021 on social media advertising.

Departmental Expenditure

231. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Finance the amount his Department has spent on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32630/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I can inform the Deputy that the Department of Finance has no record of spending on social media content production from the beginning of January 2021 to 12 June 2021.

Departmental Expenditure

232. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Finance the amount his Department and all associated agencies have spent on public relations consultancy costs since January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32647/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I can inform the Deputy that the Department of Finance has no record of spending on public relations consultancy since January 2021 to date.

A number of bodies under the aegis of my Department have incurred expenditure on public relations consultancy since January 2021, the details are as follows:

The National Asset Management Agency (NAMA) has spent €40,000 (VAT excl.) to date since January 2021 on public relations.

The National Treasury Management Agency's (NTMA) public affairs and communications team incurred costs of €35,200 (VAT excl.) in relation to public relations.

Home Building Finance Ireland (HBFI) and the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) are also bodies under my Department's aegis. As part of a shared services agreement, HBFI and the SBCI reimburse the NTMA in respect of public relations consultancy costs attributable to them and any such spend is accounted for in the cost provided above.

The Office of the Revenue Commissioners has incurred expenditure of €687 (VAT excl.) in respect of public relations consultancy during the period January 2021 to date.

Tax Code

233. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Finance the reason persons in receipt of the carer's tax credit who have a small income, including the carer's allowance are not allowed the extra €26,300 income at 20% which is normally allowed for two married persons or persons in a civil partnership who have two incomes thus diluting the benefit of the carer's tax credit considerably; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32672/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): In terms of providing a context for the present arrangements, the current structures with regard to tax bands of couples who are married or in civil partnerships has been in place for the last 20 years or so. The previous Commission on Taxation in their 2009 report observed the following:

"However, in relation to income tax, a "hybrid" arrangement has been in place since 2000, with regard to the tax band structure and credits that apply to married couples. We consider that this arrangement should remain in place as it represents a balance between, on the one hand, acknowledging the choices families make in caring for children and, on the other, taking account of the need to encourage labour force participation."

This is an area that is kept under review.

On the specific arrangements in place, I am advised by Revenue that the home carer tax credit may be claimed by a married couple or civil partners where one spouse or civil partner (the 'home carer') cares for one or more dependent persons.

Eligibility for the home carer tax credit is subject to a number of conditions, as follows:

- The married couple or civil partners must be jointly assessed to tax;
- The home carer must care for one or more dependent persons; and
- The dependent person(s) must normally reside with the married couple or civil partners for the tax year, however certain exceptions apply where the dependent person is a relative.

To obtain the full tax credit (€1,600 for 2021), the home carer's income must not exceed €7,200 in the tax year. Where the home carer's income is over €7,200, the tax credit available is reduced by one half of the excess amount earned over this limit. The home carer tax credit will therefore not be available for 2021 where the home carer's income exceeds €10,400. Both carer's benefit and carer's allowance payments from the Department of Social Protection are disregarded for the purposes of determining the annual income threshold of €7,200.

The standard rate band, where one spouse or civil partner is in receipt of income, is currently €44,300. For dual income couples, this amount can be increased by the lesser of €26,300 or the income of the lower earner. The maximum standard rate band for a dual income couple in 2021 is therefore €70,600.

By virtue of the legislation contained in section 466A Taxes Consolidation Act 1997, a couple or civil partners cannot claim both the increased standard rate band for dual income couples and the home carer tax credit in the same year. They may however claim whichever of the two is more beneficial to them.

Revenue will grant whichever relief – the home carer tax credit or the increased standard rate band - will provide the most beneficial treatment for the taxpayer. Further details on determining whether the home carer tax credit or the increased standard rate band may be more advantageous can be found in section 6 of Tax and Duty Manual Part 15-01-29 published on Revenue's website (<https://www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-15/15-01-29.pdf>).

Alternatively, taxpayers may contact the National PAYE helpline at 01-7383636 where they will receive any assistance required to establish the more advantageous option, based on their individual circumstances.

Departmental Policies

234. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will outline his key policy achievements in his Department since 27 June 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32717/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Since June 2020, my Department published Budget 2021 in October 2020, the Stability Programme Update forecasts in April 2021 as well as various economic, research and analysis papers to support policy-making, including the launch of the quarterly Economic Insights series. My Department also continues to provide technical input around the economic impact of COVID-19 and the related policy response.

Ireland's National Recovery and Resilience Plan was submitted to the European Commission on 28 May 2021. The draft Plan, worth almost €1bn, will enable Ireland to access funding under the Recovery and Resilience Facility. This Facility is the centrepiece of the Next Generation EU (NGEU), the EU's €750bn pandemic recovery package. Ireland is expected to receive approximately €915m in grants under the Facility for the period 2021-2022, with further grants in 2023.

On 30 March 2021, Ireland received €2.492bn under the EU's SURE scheme (Support to mitigate Unemployment Risks in an Emergency). SURE is a temporary instrument, providing up to €100bn in loans from the EU to Member States affected by increases in public expenditure aimed at preserving employment during the pandemic. The amount of the Irish application was based on costs already expended under the COVID-19 Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS).

In July 2020, I brought forward the Financial Provisions (COVID-19) Bill to enable the State to participate in the EU crisis recovery instruments, the SURE scheme and the €25bn Pan-European Guarantee Fund. My Department has undertaken significant work on the EU regulatory package which forms part of the EU Action Plan on Financing Sustainable Growth. Sustainable finance is a priority, accounting for 10 of the 46 action measures under the Ireland for Finance 2021 Action Plan. Ireland for Finance is the strategy for the development of the IFS sector in Ireland to 2025.

The Taxonomy Regulation entered into force in July 2020 and the Sustainable Finance Disclosures Regulation took effect from March 2021. My Department recently concluded negotiations of the Regulation establishing the Public Sector Loan Facility, the third pillar of the

Just Transition Mechanism expected to mobilise €25bn to 30bn in public investment over the 2021-2027 period.

Since 27 June 2020, my Department has transposed the Bank Recovery and Resolution Directive (EU) 2019/879, the Capital Requirements Directive (EU) 2019/878 and elements of the Capital Requirements Regulation (EU) 2019/876. In November 2020, Statutory Instrument 525 of 2020 was signed to amend the Interchange Fee Regulations to fully align with EU regulations. Negotiations on Regulation (EU) 2020/1503 on European crowdfunding service providers for business, amending Regulation (EU) 2017/1129 and Directive (EU) 2019/1937 concluded and the Directive was transposed in April 2021.

My Department completed the drawdown of €1.5bn from the National Surplus (Exceptional Contingencies) Reserve Fund to the Exchequer's Central Fund at the end of October 2020.

The Finance (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2020 was signed into law in December 2020 to allow credit unions to hold General Meetings remotely and to provide more flexibility in voting methods.

In line with its strategic goal of promoting environmentally sustainable economic progress, my Department has increased its capacity for managing the climate action agenda at a cross-departmental, EU and international level, including the Senior Officials Group on Climate, ECOFIN and the Coalition of Finance Ministers for Climate Action. My Department is actively participating in the interdepartmental structures established to develop the updated Climate Action Plan 2021.

In the period to March 2021, my Department supported the migration of Ireland's securities settlement system from the UK to Belgium. This project saw over €100bn worth of securities migrated. My Department introduced dedicated legislation and coordinated with national and EU authorities. The securities settlement migration means that Ireland remains well connected to the EU's capital markets with the stable investment and legislative environment that comes with it.

The Investment Limited Partnerships (Amendment) Act 2020 was signed into law on 23 December 2020. This will enhance the development of Ireland's international financial services (IFS) sector. My colleague, Minister of State Seán Fleming TD, officially launched the Ireland for Finance Action Plan for 2021 ahead of the sixth annual European Financial Forum in February 2021.

In November 2020, I published the Interdepartmental Pensions Reform and Taxation Group's (IDPRTG) Report on supplementary pensions. The work will inform pension debates and future policymaking which will in turn have wider, longer-term socio-economic and fiscal benefits. The Report contains forty-two recommendations and conclusions. The IDPRTG is working on a number of those recommendations for implementation later this year.

A requirement at EU level was introduced that the forthcoming EU package of Anti-Money Laundering (AML) reforms must be compatible with common law and a registration and supervision regime was introduced for virtual assets service providers for Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism purposes, the scope of which is more advanced and robust than the 5th EU Anti-Money Laundering Directive requirements and places Ireland ahead of EU obligations in this area.

The Office to Promote Competition in the Insurance Market has been created and is chaired by Minister of State Fleming.

Development and operation of the COVID-19 Restrictions Support Scheme, in particular

the wage subsidy schemes, the TWSS and the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) have been central pillars of the Government's response to the pandemic. When the TWSS ended last August, nearly 70,000 employers and over 600,000 employees had been supported. Additionally, the tax debt warehousing scheme has been placed on a statutory footing and expanded; an enhanced Help-to-Buy incentive scheme was introduced in the Financial Provisions (Covid-19) (No. 2) Act 2020 and subsequently extended until end 2021; the valuation date for Local Property Tax (LPT) has been deferred until 1 November 2021; and a revised method for calculating taxpayers' LPT liabilities was developed. The General Scheme of Finance (Local Property Tax) (Amendment) Bill was approved by Government.

Finance Act 2020 was enacted giving legislative form to the taxation proposals in the Budget 2021 Statement. Measures included a trajectory of annual increases in the rate of carbon tax leading to a rate of €100 per tonne of carbon dioxide by 2030; increase of the Earned Income Credit from €1,500 to €1,650 - delivering on the commitment to equalise this with the employee tax credit; the introduction of an accelerated capital allowances scheme for farm safety and disability adaptation equipment and legislative defensive measures to apply to the EU list of non-cooperative jurisdictions.

In January 2021, an update to the Corporation Tax Roadmap was published. Progress continued on the transposition of the Anti-Tax Avoidance Directives, with the publication in December 2020 of a Feedback Statement on the Article 4 Interest Limitation Rule, in advance of legislation in Finance Bill 2021.

On 19 May 2021, in response to a need to provide a significant disincentive to the multiple purchase by institutional investors of large parts of or whole housing estates before they reach the market, I introduced, by way of a Financial Resolution, a new measure which applies, subject to certain conditions and reliefs, a 10% stamp duty charge on bulk purchases (i.e. 10 or more in any 12-month period) of houses. This took effect from midnight that day.

Finally, I have established the Commission on Taxation and Welfare which has begun its work.

Equality Issues

235. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Finance the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit are working towards enabling access to employment for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities, including, but not limited to, persons with disabilities, persons from ethnic minorities, Travellers, Mincéirí; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32739/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Each year since 2015, my Department has satisfied the target of employing 3% of staff with disabilities and is committed to achieving the revised target of 6% by 2024. The Department's Disability Liaison Officer works closely with the National Disability Authority to ensure that it is fully compliant with its obligations under the Disability Act 2005. My Department has held awareness presentations on Autism and Dyslexia in the Workplace and has recently rolled out Diversity 3.0 Workshops to all staff. Recruitment to my Department from outside of the Civil Service is conducted through the Public Appointments Service. Where my Department recruits internally or through the Civil Service Mobility scheme, this is conducted in accordance with the Commission for Public Service Appointments Code of Practice.

Regarding the bodies under the aegis of my Department, it should be noted that not all of the

bodies have employees. The position in relation to those bodies which have direct employees is set out below.

The Central Bank of Ireland has a Diversity and Inclusion Policy Statement and Action Plan in place. The Bank has a number of partnerships and programmes aimed at attracting and hiring diverse talent. It has a partnership with the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD) and participates in their 'Willing and Able Mentoring' (WAM) Programme which promotes access to the labour market for graduates with disabilities and builds the capacity of employers to integrate disability into the mainstream workplace. The Bank has engaged with the National Council for the Blind Ireland to facilitate work placements and conduct mock interviews. The Central Bank provides reasonable accommodations throughout the recruitment process to support candidates with disabilities and this is communicated to all job applicants. Training and supports are in place for staff participating in the recruitment/interview process to ensure that a consistent, fair and inclusive experience is maintained. The Bank has established an internal Docklands Inclusion Group which supports and enables employment in the Dublin's Docklands community. Some of the initiatives run by the group include participation in the North East Inner City Transition Year Work Placement and Flash Mentoring Programme; engagement with the local community on their Bridging the Gap and Scholarship programmes; and Career LEAP (a work-readiness programme for young adults based in Dublin's Docklands/North Inner City who are not in education, employment or training). The Bank has hosted the Docklands Careers Fair aimed at supporting and enabling employment for the local Docklands community. The Bank recently launched a new Gender Identity and Expression in the Workplace Policy which was published and communicated externally. The Bank is enhancing its focus on ethnic and cultural diversity and supported the creation of a new employee-led Cultural Diversity Network last year. The Central Bank provides staffing to the Investor Compensation Company DAC which is also a body under the aegis of my Department.

The Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO) operates its recruitment campaigns in compliance with the Codes of Practice for Appointment to Positions in the Civil Service and Public Service and is committed to a policy of equal opportunity for prospective candidates. The FSPO encourages applications under all nine grounds of the Employment Equality Acts and offers reasonable accommodation to current and prospective employees with disabilities. A staff census undertaken in 2020 indicated that, at 8.23%, the FSPO exceeded the minimum requirement set out in the Disability Act 2005 in relation to the level of employment of people with disabilities. The FSPO continues to enhance practices in this area and has emphasised the requirement to achieve an inclusive and diverse workplace over the course of the next strategic period.

The National Treasury Management Agency's (NTMA) Inclusion & Diversity networks are organised by communities of colleagues who work together to drive their progress in these areas. The NTMA partners with specialist recruiters, and attends specialist recruitment fairs. It also partners with external organisations to promote the employment of people from underrepresented minorities such as ShoutOut, Trinity Centre for People with Intellectual Disabilities (TCPID), AHEAD, Specialisterne, Down Syndrome Ireland, NCBI and Open Doors, who create pathways to work through training, education and employment for refugee, asylum seekers and non-native English speakers, young people under 25 with educational barriers, people with a disability and members of the travelling community. The NTMA was awarded a WAM Leadership Award for promoting the employment of graduates with a disability in 2020. Their Disability Awareness Team (DAT) works with business units to recruit roles for persons with a disability. Candidates recruited through DAT are assigned a mentor. In relation to gender balance, the NTMA works with recruitment partners to identify 30% representation of each gender for shortlists. Recruitment advertisements are entered into a job description decoder which

ensures gender neutral language, the NTMA fields mixed interview panels and has a flexible working framework. The NTMA provides staffing for Home Building Finance Ireland, the National Asset Management Agency and the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland which are also bodies under the aegis of my Department.

The Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General (OCAG) advertises all vacancies on its website. The website is enabled with software, 'Recite me', which reads the site, translates and/or increases the size of the text to provide information to visually or audibly impaired persons who may wish to apply for vacancies. Currently just under 8% of staff have self-declared a disability. Two apprentices from Accounting Technicians Ireland commenced with OCAG in early 2021 on a two year apprenticeship programme. OCAG plans to engage transition year students as part of the NEIC Initiative as part of the 2021 or 2022 work placement cycle and has recently decided to review the possibility of engagement with the Oireachtas Work Learning (OWL) and WAM programmes. The OWL programme is an unpaid learning and development programme for young adults with an intellectual disability.

I am advised by Revenue that, as an equal opportunities employer, their competitions for employment are organised in accordance with the Code of Practice 'Appointment to Positions in the Civil Service and Public Service' published by the Commissioners for Public Service Appointments (CPSA). In line with the CPSA Code of Practice, appointments to Revenue are carried out through fair, transparent and merit-based selection processes, are made on the basis of the ability to carry out the responsibilities of the grade or post and where necessary, on the basis of qualifications also. Applicants with disabilities are accommodated and supported throughout the recruitment processes. Additionally, where necessary, Revenue is committed to providing workplace accommodations on an individual basis, including assistive technology and office equipment to staff with disabilities. The majority of Revenue offices countrywide are adapted for use by staff with physical disabilities. Furthermore, Revenue offers paid internships for persons with disabilities such as the Specialisterne Ireland and the AHEAD WAM Programmes. In recognition of its contribution to the WAM programme, Revenue received a 'Leader' award at the Building for the Future/WAM Awards in 2017 and continues to actively participate in this initiative. Revenue offers apprenticeships in the areas of Accounting Technician and Information Communication and Technology. Following successful completion of these, candidates are afforded an opportunity to secure full-time permanent positions. Finally, in line with Revenue's mission to ensure an accessible, respectful, and fair environment for its staff, Revenue conducted a staff survey in May 2021 which included the collection of information on the diverse composition of their workforce. Responses from this survey will enable Revenue to better understand, anticipate and respond to the needs of its staff.

The Tax Appeals Commission conducts its recruitment campaigns through the Government's Public Appointments Service. Any request for staff does not differentiate between persons from minority or disadvantaged communities.

Finally, the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council is an equal opportunities employer which is committed to selection on merit.

Civil Service

236. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of positions remaining unfilled by clerical officer, executive officer and higher executive officer level in the Civil Service in County Waterford; if his attention has been drawn to the impediment to the swift filling of these positions in County Waterford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32555/21]

243. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of unfilled positions in the civil service in Waterford; the number of positions available at each grade from competition; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32599/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I propose to take Questions Nos. 236 and 243 together.

It is a key responsibility of each Minister and Government Department to manage expenditure within the agreed allocations. In order to provide enhanced scope for Departments and Offices to manage staffing levels and composition within their allocated financial resources, a policy of delegated sanction was introduced by Government in 2015 in relation to staff management, including recruitment.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Public Appointments Service (PAS) is the principal recruiter for appointments to the civil service. All recruitment is demand-led and PAS undertakes competitions on behalf of the civil service to establish recruitment panels that may be drawn upon as general service vacancies arise in Government Departments or Offices across the country. Individual recruitment campaigns may be undertaken for more specialised professional or technical posts as the need arises.

As set out in the table below, PAS has confirmed that it presently has 15 requests on hand from Government Departments or Offices to fill civil service vacancies in the Waterford region:

Grade	No. of vacant posts being filled by PAS at present
Temporary Clerical Officer	2
Clerical Officer	11
Executive Officer	1
Higher Executive Officer	1

9 of the Clerical Officer posts related to a bulk intake request that PAS has recently received from Revenue. Of the 15 requests on hand, 13 were received by PAS this month.

The timeframe to fill some roles may be impacted in a number of ways. This can include, for example, specific conditions to be satisfied during candidate clearance including Garda Vetting in instances where individuals have lived overseas, where there are delays in candidates providing supporting documentation or if candidates withdraw from a competition in the final stages of the recruitment process.

Public Sector Pay

237. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will examine the matter of pay for public defender barristers who currently due to cuts from 2008 to 2011, are paid in line with rates set in 2002 whilst State solicitors who work on the same cases are paid at rate fixed as a result of pay restoration in 2017; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32878/21]

247. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the current situation of and plans for the implementation of pay restoration for criminal barristers similar to that already implemented for State solicitors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32659/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I propose to take Questions Nos. 237 and 247 together.

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 advices 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.

As it relates to the matter of State Solicitor pay, it should be noted that pay rates here differ from fees paid to counsel by the State. State Solicitor pay has an established link with the Assistant Principal or AP grade within the Civil Service - it comprises a personal element for the individual State Solicitor which is equivalent to the AP salary, a staffing element related to Clerical Officer grade and an expenses element that increases in relation to certain Consumer Price Index movements. The personal and staffing elements currently attract changes as per National Wage Agreements.

Civil Service

238. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will report on the newly launched Civil Service Renewal 2030 plan. [29419/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): Civil Service Renewal 2030, a new ten-year strategy for the Civil Service, was launched on 21st May. In addition to publishing the strategy, the launch provided an opportunity to highlight a number of projects undertaken across the Civil Service which show the important work carried out by civil servants up and down the country, particularly in responding to the challenges the country has faced over the last 18 months.

The strategy provides an ambitious framework for the future for the Civil Service and its staff. It builds on the strengths of the Civil Service and the initiatives delivered under the first Civil Service Renewal Plan and provides a long term framework to continuously improve. It is focused on achieving meaningful outcomes for society, the Government and stakeholders.

The strategy's vision is for 'an innovative, professional and agile Civil Service that improves the lives of the people of Ireland through excellence in service delivery and strategic policy development'. It has three core themes: delivering evidenced-informed policy and services, harnessing digital technology and innovation, and building the workforce, workplace and organisation of the future.

The strategy's development is the result of an extensive consultation process informed by experience and expertise from across the Civil Service. A Taskforce of senior officials, representing all of the Civil Service Management Board (CSMB) Departments and Offices, have shaped the Strategy. It also draws on evidence collected from staff engagement during the implementation of the first Civil Service Renewal Plan and the results of the 2020 Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey. It is also informed by the lessons learned in the six Organisational Capability Reviews completed to date and from the Civil and Public Service response to the challenges of COVID-19. The strategy acknowledges the environment in which the Civil

Service operates and identifies important challenges facing the Civil Service now and in the future.

The strategy will be implemented through a cycle of three-year action plans and work is underway on the first plan which will set out the priorities for the next 3 years. The first action plan will be published in the autumn.

Legislative Measures

239. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to introduce new legislation to deal with whistle-blower allegations. [27838/21]

240. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to reform protected disclosure regulations. [27839/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I propose to take Questions Nos. 239 and 240 together.

Directive (EU) 2019/1937 on the protection of persons who report breaches of Union law (“the Whistleblowing Directive”) was adopted in October 2019 and Ireland has until 17 December 2021 to transpose it into Irish law.

On 12 May 2021, following approval from Government, I published the General Scheme of a Bill to amend the Protected Disclosures Act to give effect to the Directive. The General Scheme has now been referred to the Joint Committee on Finance, Public Expenditure and Reform and Taoiseach for pre-legislative scrutiny and also to the Attorney General to commence formal drafting of the Bill for presentation to the Oireachtas later this year.

The proposals I have set out in the General Scheme will enhance the already comprehensive protections afforded under the Protected Disclosures Act 2014 for disclosers.

Question No. 240 answered with Question No. 239.

Flood Risk Management

241. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the approval of the Crossmolina flood relief scheme; when the scheme will be approved to proceed to tender; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32062/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The current status in relation to Crossmolina Flood Relief Scheme is as follows:

As part of the approval process, the OPW submitted the scheme documentation to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (MPER) for Statutory Confirmation under the Arterial Drainage Acts 1945 and 1995. As part of this statutory process, stakeholders were afforded a formal opportunity to provide comments on the environmental element of the proposed works. Once this step concluded, the Department of Public Expenditure (DPER) procured independent consultants to carry out an assessment of the Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIAR) and Natura Impact Statement (NIS).

Following a review of the material by DPER, the Office of Public Works received comments

and requests for supplementary information. The project team for the Crossmolina Flood Relief Scheme are now compiling responses and supplementary information for DPER and will respond with the additional requested information in July. Once DPER receive this material, they will in turn need to review this material prior to granting Statutory Confirmation of the Scheme. We cannot provide an indicative timeline for this stage as it is outside of our control.

Subject to a satisfactory conclusion of DPER's Consultation and Independent Review, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform will give statutory consent to the scheme, allowing the project team to bring the Crossmolina Flood Relief Scheme to construction. Subject to confirmation, it is currently anticipated that the OPW construction crew will be in a position to commence advance construction works this year. These are indicative timelines and may vary depending on the confirmation process and favourable ground conditions.

Once DPER/MPER have completed their review, further information will be provided on the project website, which is available at: <https://www.floodinfo.ie/frs/en/crossmolina/home/>

Civil Service

242. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of civil servants on special Covid-19 leave at the end of 2020; the number at the end of May 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32543/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The number of Civil Servants recorded as being on COVID-19 special leave with pay at the end of 2020 was 139. As at the end of May 2021, this number was at 14.

Special leave with pay applies in lieu of sick leave for COVID-19 when an employee is advised to self-isolate and is displaying symptoms of COVID-19 or had a positive test.

The full details of the criteria for, and duration of, special leave with pay for COVID-19 is laid out in the Guidance on working arrangements during COVID-19 for the Civil and Public Service, which is kept under regular review by my officials.

<https://www.gov.ie/en/news/092fff-update-on-working-arrangements-and-leave-associated-with-covid-19-fo/>

Question No. 243 answered with Question No. 236.

Departmental Expenditure

244. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the amount his Department and associated agencies have spent on social media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32618/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I wish to advise the Deputy that neither my Department nor the Office of Government Procurement, which is also part of my Department, have incurred any costs associated with social media advertising in the period specified.

This is also the position for the bodies under the aegis of my Department, with the exception of the Office of Public Works (OPW) and the Public Appointments Service (PAS), the details of

which are set out in the table below.

Office of Public Works (OPW)	
Phoenix Park – Transport and Mobility options study	€1,748
Phoenix Park – Deer Awareness Campaign	€365
Rathfarnham rhythms concerts	€125
Blasket Centre – public information	€10
Public Appointments Service (PAS)	
Recruitment Advertising for a range of public service roles*	€22,194
Quarterly Fees which allow PAS to avail of Job Slots and Recruit Advertisements (this enables PAS to target advertise for specific roles).	€7,600 (quarterly fee)
Targeted recruitment advertisement for Aistriitheoir role in the Houses of the Oireachtas	€650

* 81 recruitment advertisements from 01/01/2021 to 12/06/2021

Departmental Expenditure

245. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the amount his Department has spent on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32635/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department incurred social media content production costs of €593.00 in the specified period. The purpose of this spend was for the continuation of a public awareness video recording on a social media platform, which advised of the extension of the deadline for submissions to the public consultation phase of the National Development Plan Review.

Departmental Expenditure

246. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the amount his Department and all associated agencies have spent on public relations consultancy costs since January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32652/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I wish to advise the Deputy that neither my Department nor the Office of Government Procurement, which is also part of my Department, have incurred any costs associated with public relations consultancy in the period specified.

This is also the position for the bodies under the aegis of my Department, with the exception of the Public Appointments Service (PAS) and the Office of the National Lottery Regulator, the details of which are set out in the table below.

I have been informed that the Office of Public Works (OPW) will respond directly to the Deputy in the coming days.

Public Appointments Service (PAS)	
General PR Services	€10,265
Office of the National Lottery Regulator (ORNL)	
General PR Services	€10,619
Stakeholder Communications Survey	€3,229

Question No. 247 answered with Question No. 237.

Departmental Websites

248. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the breakdown of the costs associated with the establishment and maintenance of gov.ie. [32685/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The cost of gov.ie until the end of 2020 was €2,446,252. This includes all hosting, development and content migration. However, the cost-savings of the project have totalled €2.92 million with further savings yet to be realised.

There are also many other benefits associated with having a central point of access for government departments. This has resulted in a cost per click in 2020 of €0.008. This is more far lower than the average cost per click for the individual departments which was €0.021.

Departmental Websites

249. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if a review has been conducted into the way gov.ie adheres to the web content accessibility guidelines and the National Disability Authority IT accessibility guidelines; and if he will share the outcome of that review. [32686/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): A review has been carried out. This identified a range of issues – the majority of which have been addressed by the gov.ie development team. A follow-on accessibility review is planned and a report on this will be published on gov.ie in the coming months.

Departmental Websites

250. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of plans to bring the gov.ie website up to date with web content accessibility guidelines. [32687/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): gov.ie is currently partially compliant with WCAG 2.1 AA guidelines. The main areas in which it is not compliant are:

Tables: Tables need a new line of header code to be accessible. (This will be available by the end of July).

Images: Not all images have image or meta-descriptions. (This will be fixed by mid-July).

PDFs: Not all PDFs are accessible. (staff are being trained in making accessible PDFs)

The architecture and static elements of gov.ie are highly accessible. Lighthouse gives gov.ie a score in excess of 95%.

The other main area where gov.ie is improving accessibility is by the use of plain English. Service content on gov.ie now has an average reading age of 14. This compares with a reading age of 23 on the old departmental sites.

The gov.ie team are also planning a range of measures to improve accessibility. These include: user testing sessions, accessibility reviews, increased training for CMS users and techni-

cal improvements to the site itself.

Departmental Websites

251. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the length of time gov.ie has been in beta phase of development; and when it will move out of beta phase. [32688/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): gov.ie has been in beta since October 2018 and will come out of beta once all departments are live later in 2021.

Climate Action Plan

252. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of action 6a of the Climate Action plan; the costs involved to complete same and to publish the methodology. [32690/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): Action 6a of the ‘Interim Climate Actions 2021’ called on my Department to “Develop a methodology for the analysis of departmental capital investment proposals from a climate perspective” as part of the larger action to “Publish a revised National Development Plan detailing Government capital expenditures planned over 2021 – 2030.”

This methodology was developed by officials in my Department, in consultation with officials in the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications. This methodology was duly issued to all Departments via a detailed guidance note and response template in line with Action 6b of the Interim Climate Actions. The results of this analysis will be incorporated into the NDP Review.

As this was an internal process, no costs were incurred, save the allocation of the time of staff in my Department. I will be happy to publish the methodology as part of the publication of the NDP Review.

Climate Action Plan

253. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the current and capital costs involved with each action item in the Interim Climate Action Plan under his Department’s responsibility. [32700/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The actions committed to in the Interim Annex of Climate Actions by my Department are broadly focused on ensuring that the tools and procedures in use across Government, such as the Public Spending Code and public procurement rules, take sufficient account of climate considerations.

The specific actions assigned to my Department include activities such as the progressive implementation of green budgeting reforms to promote and achieve improved environmental outcomes through the budgetary process; developing a methodology for assessing the potential climate and environmental impacts of each Government Departments’ capital investment proposals as part of the NDP review; and revising the shadow price of carbon applied to all

Government investment appraisal to reflect the enhanced climate ambition set out in the draft Climate Action Bill, once the Bill is adopted.

The actions that fall under the Department's responsibility in the Interim Climate Action Plan are being developed internally by my officials, with input from other Government Departments as appropriate and occasional specific support provided by vehicles like DG REFORM's technical support instrument. As a result, my Department has incurred no costs, current or capital, in the development of these actions, save the allocation of the time of staff employed by my Department and no further costs are anticipated at this time.

Departmental Policies

254. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will outline his key policy achievements in his Department since 27 June 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32722/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I wish to advise the Deputy that in line with the requirements of Section 4 of the Public Service Management Act, 1997 my Department prepares a progress report on the implementation of its strategy statement annually. The Annual Report for 2020 was published on 12 May, was laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas and is available on the gov.ie website at this link:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/da1589-dper-annual-reports-2013-16/>

The Executive Summary of the Report sets out at a high level some of the main developments in 2020 as a whole, with further detail included throughout the report. Some key areas of work included:

- Managing Public Expenditure better by:
 - managing the impact on the public finances of measures introduced to support people and businesses in the context of Covid-19;
 - continuation of the rolling Spending Review process to provide a robust evidence base to inform policy making in the short and medium term;
 - overseeing gross current expenditure by Departments of just over €85.3 billion and capital expenditure of €9.6 billion;
 - progressing the Performance Budgeting and Equality Budgeting initiatives;
 - supporting the implementation of Project Ireland 2040; and
 - supporting financial management reform;
- Proactively preparing for the end of the Brexit transition period, including negotiation and rollout of the new Brexit Adjustment Reserve and developing Ireland's National Recovery and Resilience Plan;
- Continuing to oversee the management of the 2014-2020 EU Structural Fund Programmes, engagement in the development of the 2021-2027 EU Cohesion Policy programmes and oversight of the North South EU programmes and the Special EU Programmes Body;
- Working to agree "Building Momentum", the new public service agreement for 2021-2022, and managing the implementation of public service pension policy;

- Driving Civil Service Renewal and wider Public Service Reform, including:

- Co-ordinating the implementation of the Civil Service Renewal Programme, guiding and monitoring implementation of the framework for development and innovation in the Public Service (Our Public Service 2020) and leading a whole-of-government process to develop a new vision and ten-year strategy for the Civil Service;

- Continued implementation of the People Strategy for the Civil Service 2017-2020, including, in response to Covid-19, providing leadership and a public service-wide collaborative approach to the issues arising for public service employers, transferring online learning for staff via OneLearning, as well as providing supports for staff through the Employee Assistance Service and Office of the Chief Medical Officer; and

- pursuing reforms to deliver open, accountable and ethical government;

- Driving the digital agenda, including through supporting the move to wide-scale remote working in response to Covid-19, progressing digital solutions to challenges posed (e.g. the Contact Tracing App) and using the gov.ie portal as a key communications channel; and taking forward the implementation of Public Service ICT Strategies; and

- Implementation of the Public Procurement Reform Programme, including:

- completing 662 competitions for public service bodies, covering expenditure of €470 million; and

- establishing 32 national commercial arrangements, covering an estimated spend of €1.5 billion over their term, and a further eight discrete contracts covering spend of almost €200 million.

The Deputy may also wish to note that a broad range of information and updates about the Department's key policy areas are published on its section of the gov.ie website at the following link:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/department-of-public-expenditure-and-reform/>

Equality Issues

255. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit are working towards enabling access to employment for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities, including, but not limited to, persons with disabilities, persons from ethnic minorities, Travellers, Mincéirí; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32744/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): As Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, I have policy responsibility for recruitment to the Civil Service. The Civil Service is strongly committed to equality of opportunity for all in terms of its recruitment and employment practices. This commitment is demonstrated in the *Civil Service 2030 Renewal Strategy* that was launched last month.

The Public Appointments Services (PAS), which is an body under the aegis of my Department, is the principal recruiter for the Civil Service. PAS plays a central role in attracting a diverse range of talented people from all backgrounds to take up employment opportunities in the Civil Service.

PAS has established a dedicated Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Unit and embedded Diversity Champions throughout the organisation. In March 2021, PAS launched its first *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2021-2023* following extensive and ongoing engagements with NGOs, including representatives from organisations including, for example, Mi-Wow, New Communities Partnership, AkiDwA, Business In The Community, the National Youth Council, the Immigrant Council of Ireland as well as groups representing members of the Traveller and Roma communities.

Employment of people with disabilities

Officials from my Department and from PAS sit on the Implementation Group for the National Comprehensive Employment Strategy for the Employment of People with Disabilities 2015-2024. This national strategy commits to increase the percentage of staff with a disability from 3% to 6% by 2024 (presently 3% under the Disability Act 2005). This employment target is monitored by the National Disability Authority. At the end of 2019, 5.1% of civil servants self-declared as having a disability. Data at the end of 2020 is presently being collated for return to the NDA.

There are many positive examples under CES of how my Department, working alongside key stakeholders in the Civil Service including PAS, has been involved in promoting civil service employment pathways for persons with a disability. These include:

Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) Programme

In partnership with AHEAD, this offers graduates with a disability a 6 month mentored paid work placement in either the private sector or Civil Service. My Department and PAS play a key role in driving the annual intakes of work placements across the Civil Service. To date, WAM has placed over 490 graduates, of which 47% (230) have been placements across 33 Departments/Offices. Over 80% of WAM graduates have subsequently secured longer-term employment upon completion of their WAM programme. Officials from my Department are presently scoping the possibility of a confined competition to create permanent civil service employment opportunities for graduates of the WAM programme.

Oireachtas Work Learning (OWL) Programme

OWL is an applied learning, development and socialisation programme for adults with an intellectual disability that was launched as a pilot programme in September 2018. It is facilitated by the Houses of the Oireachtas Service in collaboration with two sponsor organisations, KARE and WALK. The goal of the Programme is to provide trainees with the skills, knowledge and ability to gain meaningful employment via the unique opportunity to gain practical work experience, as well as accredited learning over an 11 month period. Over a quarter of the initial OWL interns have since gone on to secure permanent civil service employment through confined competitions.

Employment of people from ethnic minority and socially disadvantage backgrounds including members of the Traveller and Roma Community

The Department of Children, Equality, Diversity, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) is leading out on the Migrant Integration Strategy 2017-2021 that set a minimum 1% employment target for the people of ethnic minority/EEA migrant status.

PAS have recently undertaken a review of general competitions in 2020 at all levels within the Civil Service to review the number of applicants from ethnic minority backgrounds that applied for, and were successful in, competitions. This information is set out in the table below.

Officials from my Department are participating on a Joint Working Group with officials from DCEDIY to progress a number of Programme for Government commitments in this area, including the development of paid internships. It is planned to leverage the positive experience of the OWL and WAM Programmes by partnering with NGOs. My Department and PAS, for example, are presently supporting the introduction of a pilot paid internship programme for members of the Traveller and Roma Community by the Department of Justice.

Officials from my Department and PAS have also recently made submissions to, and appeared before, the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Key Issues affecting the Traveller Community in relation to recent initiatives to promote employment opportunities in the civil service.

OneLearning, the Civil Service Learning and Development Shared Service Centre based within my Department, is in the process of tendering for its second generation of training courses for civil servants following extensive stakeholder engagement, including participating by representatives of IHREC. It is envisaged that a number of additional training courses on equality, diversity and inclusion will be developed for civil servants will come on stream and will include courses on the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty.

Under Action 16 of Our Public Service 2020, my Department has also recently developed and launched an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Vision Statement and Maturity Model for the Public Service.

In terms of civil servants based in my own Department, the HR Unit developed the *People@PER HR Strategy* that has a focus on embracing and embedding a culture of diversity and inclusion across the Department through diversity initiatives and training. This has included the establishment of a vibrant cross-Divisional and cross-grade Diversity and Inclusion staff forum, the PERspectives Group. My Department has a Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) who supports new members of staff with a disability or existing staff who acquire a disability and raise awareness about disability. New hires receive the Code of Practice for the Employment of People with a Disability in the Irish Civil Service, a welcome letter from the Department's DLO and FAQs on Disability prepared by the National Disability Authority. The induction of new hires includes a presentation and Q&A session with the DLO.

In September 2020, I published a *State Bodies Code of Practice Annex of Gender Balance, Diversity & Inclusion*. This requires the Chairperson of each board to submit a comprehensive report to the relevant Minister each year that must set out progress in addressing gender equality and diversity issues.

In terms of bodies under my aegis, all have appointed Disability Liaison Officers (DLOs) and have proactively made available work placement opportunities for participants on the WAM and OWL programmes, with a number of these being converted to permanent positions. Embedding diversity and inclusion with each body is a core focus of the respective Management Boards with key ED&I initiatives reflected in existing local HR strategies or those being developed by bodies, such as the EMPOWER People Strategy in the case of the Office of Government Procurement.

I am committed to ensuring that we continue to build a diverse Civil Service that is reflective of the modern Ireland that we serve.

In the case of Candidates that voluntarily identified to PAS as being from an ethnic minority background

2020 Civil Service Competition	Total Applications for Competition	Number of such candidates at application stage	% total applicants for competition at application stage	Number of such candidates subsequently placed on panel	% of successful candidates subsequently placed on panel for assignment to a civil service employer
Temporary Clerical Officer	7,437	178	2.4%	70	2.4%
Clerical Officer	26,356	481	1.8%	14	1.8%
Executive Officer	14,602	344	2.4%	4	.01%
Administrative Officer (Graduate entry)	8,259	619	7.5%	4	4.4%
Assistant Principal	3,821	30	0.8%	1	1.1%
Principal Officer	1,754	16	0.9%	1	1.5%

Public Sector Pay

256. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which FEMPI restoration has been completed across all income brackets throughout the Public Sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32770/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The process of unwinding the Financial Emergency (FEMPI) legislation commenced under the Lansdowne Road Agreement 2016 – 2018, with the remainder of the process largely completed under the Public Service Stability Agreement 2018 – 2020 (PSSA). This will continue under ‘Building Momentum: A New Public Service Agreement, 2021 – 2022’.

At this point, salary rates up to approx. €70,000, which accounts for over 90% of the public service, have been fully restored.

Further measures provided for in the Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017 that are needed to complete the unwinding of FEMPI can be found at Section 19 and Section 20 of the Act. Section 19 of the Act provides for the completion of FEMPI restoration for public servants earning annualised basic salaries of not more than €150,000 by no later than 1 July 2021. Section 20 of the Act provides for the completion of FEMPI restoration for public servants earning annualised basic salaries of more than €150,000 by no later than 1 July 2022.

Each year, under the terms of the FEMPI Act 2013, I am obliged to carry out an annual review of the operation, effectiveness and impact of the FEMPI Acts, having regard to the overall economic conditions in the State and national competitiveness. In this annual review, I am also to consider whether or not any of the provision of the relevant Acts continue to be necessary having regard to the purposes of those Acts, the revenues of the State and State commitments in respect of public service pay and pensions.

The 2020 annual review, a written report of which was laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas on the 23rd June 2020, recommended the continuation of the unwinding of the FEMPI measures in line with the provisions enacted in the Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017. The 2021 annual review will be published by the end of the month and will provide the Deputy with additional detail.

Inflation Rate

257. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform

the extent to which his Department monitors inflation in the construction sector with particular reference to the impact on the delivery and cost of major capital health projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32771/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Construction Sector Group (CSG), established in 2018 and chaired by the Secretary General of my Department, ensures regular and open dialogue between Government and the construction sector. Its remit includes, but is not limited to, considering opportunities to introduce reforms within the sector that will help in controlling construction price inflation.

To support the work of the CSG an annual Build Report was produced by my Department in 2019 and 2020. The purpose of this report is to give a comprehensive overview of the performance and prospects of the Irish construction sector, based on the available official statistics and data. The report aids in monitoring of trends across the sector, ranging from output and investment to employment and cost inflation, so that risks and performance issues can be identified and addressed where necessary.

Inflation measures how much more expensive a set of goods and services becomes over a certain period of time. A number of measures relating to inflation in the Irish construction sector are detailed in the Build Report. The data included in the report is mostly obtained from the Central Statistics Office.

Two major costs for the construction industry are the cost of materials and the cost of wages.

Inflation in the cost of construction materials can be measured through the Wholesale Price Index. As for the wage inflation, this has been measured by monitoring average hourly earnings for the construction sector.

The Wholesale Price Index (WPI) for Building and Construction Materials provides a general indication of price trends in the sector. WPI essentially measures the changes in the prices of goods sold and traded in bulk. In April 2021 the WPI for Building and Construction Materials stood at 3.4% on an annual basis. However within this there are certain materials which have seen elevated levels of inflation such as timber and steel.

Average Hourly earnings for the construction sector (includes all employees of construction) increased by 9% between Q1 2020 and Q2 2021.

The Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland Tender Price index reveals that national construction tender prices increased by 1.3% in the second half of 2020, up from 0.9% in the previous 6 months. The results indicate a slight rebound of tender price growth in the construction sector, with national annual inflation now at 2.2% (Jan 2020 to Dec 2020), however it is still significantly less than tender price inflation levels pre-Covid. The Index is the only independent assessment of construction tender prices in Ireland. It is compiled by the Quantity Surveying members of the Society. The Tender Price Index (TPI) is based largely on sentiment returns with actual tender returns included in the calculations. The TPI is for non-residential projects during the period in question. It is based on predominately new build projects with values in excess of € 0.5m and covers all regions of Ireland. The Index relates to average price increases across differing project types and locations.

Overall, while there was elevated construction sector inflation in 2019, construction price inflation slowed overall in 2020 as a result of Covid-19. Elevated levels of inflation possesses risk for the construction sector and wider economy as a whole by undermining value for money.

The impacts of this on the delivery and cost of major capital health projects is a matter for the Minister for Health. Under the delegated capital sanction provided to Departments each

year they are expected to make programme and project contingency provision, factoring inflation along with other risks into their budgeting.

There is no cost adjustment available for inflation under the public works contracts until a period of 2.5 years after the contract is awarded. As part of the tender process contractors are expected to price for inflation which has typically been 5 – 7% per annum in recent years.

Departmental Policies

258. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which reform throughout the public sector continues to be an option in achieving good value for money; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32772/21]

265. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he plans to introduce further reforms with a view to achieving better value for money for the Exchequer and ultimately the taxpayer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32779/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I propose to take Questions Nos. 258 and 265 together.

I thank the Deputy for the questions.

Ongoing reform of our Public Services continues to be an integral part of this Department's function since its establishment in 2011. In view of the significant and pervasive impacts experienced as a consequence of the Covid19 crisis, the Government's programme of reform and modernisation will become especially more relevant as we seek to return our economy and society to full recovery.

In accordance with the Department's Statement of Strategy, officials are currently preparing the next phase of public service reform (to succeed *Our Public Service 2020*) which will incorporate priorities that were articulated in the recently published Public Service Innovation Strategy, *Making Innovation Real* and sets its focus on the wider Public Service. My Department has also recently published an ambitious programme of renewal for the Civil Service (*CSR 2030*). Additionally, the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer in my Department is currently finalising a new Public Service Digital Strategy, which will be published in the coming months.

These new plans and strategies will reinvigorate the reform agenda and make certain that we capitalise on the positive changes that we have witnessed since the onset of the pandemic. They will also incorporate a number of Programme for Government commitments that will further enable the Public Service to be more responsive to the future needs of our citizens and to be resilient to any similar economic shocks of this nature.

As regards the drive for more value for money, the generation of efficiencies and the realisation of more cost-effective public services, all public organisations are required to treat public funds with care, and to ensure that the best possible value for money is obtained whenever public money is being spent or invested. This is in accordance with the Public Spending Code. Moreover, Action 5 of *Our Public Service 2020* (Action 5) emphasises the need to ensure value-for-money principles are adhered to across the Public Service.

As part of this broader approach to ensuring value for money, the introduction of shared services and centralised procurement in earlier phases of reform have been further integrated in public service operations and expanded into new areas. These expansions will continue apace

and this Department is actively exploring new areas and mechanisms to further embed reforms that will enhance the cost-effectiveness of public services; for example, through greater use of opportunities presented through digitalisation, intelligent automation, innovation and the implementation of new ways of working and service design.

The Deputy may also wish to note that by agreeing to the Public Service Pay Agreement '*Building Momentum*', parties have committed to the ongoing reform and development of public services to meet the changing needs of citizens, communities, businesses and the staff who deliver our public services.

Parties have agreed to maintain the momentum for reform and to continue co-operation with regard to flexibility and change to support effective responses to the challenges posed by COVID-19, recognising the need to look beyond traditional ways of working, where necessary and appropriate, and to manage change to ensure high quality public services, high performance, the maintenance and development of staff skills and competencies, and the delivery of measurable outcomes for the public.

Public Procurement Contracts

259. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if reform in the context of public procurement can be used as a means of producing better value for money in respect of State projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32773/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): Sustained reform of public works procurement has been ongoing since 2004 when the construction procurement reform initiative commenced. The publication of the Capital Works Management Framework (CWMF) in 2007 marked a new departure in the procurement of public works projects. All public works projects that are delivered under the Exchequer-funded element of the Government's capital plan must be procured in accordance with the provisions laid down in the CWMF, which is mandated by circular. The CWMF provides an integrated set of contractual provisions, guidance material, technical templates and procedures that cover all aspects of the delivery process of a public works project from inception to final project delivery and review to assist contracting authorities in meeting their ongoing procurement requirements. The use of the framework results in a more cost effective delivery of public works projects because of the systematic and detailed approach to, amongst other things, planning (both preparatory and detailed), and capital budgeting as well as design and construction cost control. The process required under the CWMF reflects the balance that must be struck in awarding a public contract between value for money and a quality project outcome. All the documents that make up the framework are available online at: constructionprocurement.gov.ie.

A 2014 review of a key element of the CWMF, the public works contracts highlighted a number of areas that were contributing to poor project outcomes including cost increases. Poor definition of the project requirements was identified as one of the main sources of claims under the contracts, claims that were often upheld in the dispute resolution procedures under the contract. A range of interim measures were introduced in 2016 in response to the recommendations set out at the culmination of the review.

A broader review of the policies and practices deployed in the procurement of public works projects commenced in March 2019. The focus of the review is on improving the delivery of construction projects in terms of quality, timely delivery and cost outcomes.

The review will deliver significant changes to the CWMF over the coming years. The review

process involves extensive engagement, both with industry stakeholders, and with the public bodies charged with the delivery of public works projects on a broad range of issues such as:

- price variation;
- risk management;
- creating a better quality: price balance in the award of contracts;
- adoption of BIM on public works projects;
- liability, indemnity and insurance requirements;
- performance evaluation;
- encouraging collaborative working.

A high-level strategy has been developed with the Government Construction Contracts Committee (GCCC) that will guide the implementation that will be addressed primarily through the progressive refinement and enhancement of the CWMF.

The onset of Covid-19 has impacted on the conduct of the review as resources were deployed to address the disruption to projects arising out of the necessary public health measures since March 2020. Nonetheless progress continued on a range of issues which will be actioned throughout 2021 and 2022.

Public Procurement Contracts

260. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his attention has been drawn to the belief that public procurement policies here are a major obstacle to achieving parity with other European countries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32774/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): Public procurement is governed by EU and national rules, the aim of which is to ensure that procurement transactions and decisions are open and transparent, fair, equitable and achieve value for money. These rules govern the way public authorities and certain utility operators purchase goods, works and services.

The rules are set out in four principal EU Directives (Directive 2009/81/EC, Directive 2014/23/EU; Directive 2014/24/EU and Directive 2014/25/EU) which are transposed into national legislation in each Member State. These rules govern the conduct of public procurement procedures for public contracts whose monetary value exceeds a certain threshold. Public contracts applying below those threshold values are, nonetheless, expected to conform with principles of public procurement set out in the Directives, in particular equal treatment, non-discrimination, mutual recognition, proportionality and transparency.

Legal oversight of the procurement rules is set out in a further set of Directives governing review and remedy procedures for interested parties to a public procurement procedure. These Directives - 89/665/EEC, 92/13/EEC, 2007/66/EC – have been transposed into national legislation in each Member State and operate through a range of administrative and judicial bodies.

The uniformity of the procurement regime across the EU, established by the full suite of procurement-related Directives, is further reinforced by important procurement principles

emerging from the case law in each Member State and from the Court of Justice of the European Union in the area of public procurement.

To further enhance coordination and coherence of approach across the EU, each Member State, including Ireland, is represented at the several EU Commission expert groups on procurement. These groups are designed to ensure a consistency of governance in public procurement and to guide ongoing developments in the area. Through the Office of Government Procurement (OGP), my Department is committed to ensuring Ireland's procurement policy is fully aligned with other Member States.

Departmental Functions

261. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of incidences in which his Department has had to intervene to ensure good practice, better value for money and faster, more efficient delivery of public projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32775/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): In my role as Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform I am responsible for setting the overall capital allocations across Departments and for monitoring monthly expenditure at a Departmental level. Decisions on how and where those allocations are invested by Departments are a matter, in the first instance, for my ministerial colleagues. The role of my Department is in respect of the monitoring of overall expenditure by Departments, and not the oversight of individual projects.

My Department is also responsible for maintaining the national frameworks within which Departments operate to ensure appropriate accounting for and value for money in public expenditure such as the Public Spending Code. The Public Spending Code sets the value for money requirements and guidance for evaluating, planning and managing capital projects. Management and delivery of investment projects and public services within allocation and the national frameworks is a key responsibility of every Department and Minister.

The Public Spending Code is not static and was updated in 2019 following an extensive consultation process. This update has strengthened the guidance to better align with the realities of project delivery and with a particular focus on improved appraisal, cost estimation and management. In line with the principle of proportionality, the requirements for smaller projects have been streamlined and the requirements for larger projects support a better consideration of options, risks, costs and deliverability.

Public Expenditure Policy

262. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which his Department have identified projects least compliant with the principal of achieving good value for money; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32776/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I should first explain that as Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform I am responsible for setting the overall multi-annual capital expenditure ceilings for each Ministerial Vote Group as set out in the National Development Plan and Project Ireland 2040. My Department is also responsible for maintaining the national frameworks within which Departments operate to ensure appropriate accounting for and value for money in public expenditure such as the Public Spending Code. The Public Spending Code sets the value for money requirements and guidance for evaluating,

planning and managing capital projects. Management and delivery of investment projects and public services within allocation and the national frameworks is a key responsibility of every Department and Minister.

Public Expenditure Policy

263. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the degree to which the public expenditure to date in 2021 is in line with budgetary expectations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32777/21]

264. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if particular Government Departments or their subordinate bodies are shown to be less than compliant with public expenditure and reform guidelines; if so, if corrective steps have been taken; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32778/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I propose to take Questions Nos. 263 and 264 together.

In the period from 2014, prior to the impact of Covid-19, the overall fiscal strategy adopted by the Government greatly improved the monetary position of the State with the deficit at the end of 2014 of €7.1 billion or 3.6% of GDP moving to a surplus of 0.5% of GDP at the end of 2019. The position regarding gross general government debt against GDP also improved over this time period, from 104.4% of GDP at the end of 2014 to 57.4% of GDP at the end of 2019.

Underpinning this fiscal strategy was the policy of sustainable annual increases in public expenditure during this timeframe, with gross voted expenditure increasing by a total of €13.1 billion or 24%, from €54.1 billion in 2014 to €67.2 billion in 2019. Over this period, to allow for the delivery of key infrastructure projects, there was a clear focus on increasing levels of capital investment by the State.

The decisions made in recent budgets have ensured that we had the financial resources to act in response to Covid-19 and to provide substantial supports to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic during 2020 and for 2021, with some €28 billion allocated to date across the two years for support measures.

For 2021, the Revised Estimates for Public Services (REV) outlined an overall Government Expenditure Ceiling of €87.8 billion, which included almost €12 billion in funding to respond to Covid-19. Within this overall expenditure ceiling, €5.4 billion was set aside in reserve to be used as required during the year for temporary, targeted measures to mitigate the impacts of Covid-19.

This reserve was partially allocated as part of Further Revised Estimates agreed by Government in April, with almost €4.3 billion in additional funding provided to the Departments of Social Protection; Enterprise, Trade and Employment; and Rural and Community Development for measures in response to the impact of Covid-19. In addition to this, additional Departmental Estimates will be presented to the Dáil in due course reflecting the various measures set out in the National Economic Recovery Plan.

It is a key responsibility of every Department and Minister to manage expenditure within their respective allocations, particularly given the exceptional level of funding being provided this year, and careful monitoring of spending against profile and of progress on programmes and projects is required. My Department is in regular contact with all other Departments and Offices regarding this.

Based on Departmental Estimates presented to the Dáil to date and as set out in the most recent Fiscal Monitor, total gross voted expenditure to end-May 2021 amounted to nearly €33 billion. While this is nearly €1½ billion ahead on the same period in 2020, the public health restrictions in place this year have impacted on spending plans of departments. Accordingly, gross voted expenditure is running almost €1.4 billion or 4% below profile.

In 2021 the main spending Departments will be reporting to Government quarterly on spending within their areas. This stands alongside a range of reforms implemented in recent years in order to enhance Ireland's budgetary framework and to ensure efficient and effective management of public expenditure. Looking forward, the Programme for Government commits to continuing reform and improvement of the Budgetary process, building on the budgetary reforms already in place and the significant work on public service reform already completed.

Furthermore, inflationary pressures continue to be dealt with on a year-by-year basis as part of the normal budgetary process. The rationale for this approach is clear, where the non-application of price increases can be used as a mechanism to generate efficiency dividends and promote productivity where State bodies are effectively challenged to maintain the existing levels of service without making specific provision for indexation. As the economy recovers from the impact of the pandemic, this is an area that we will need to keep under review to ensure that value for money is delivered across Government projects and programmes.

Question No. 264 answered with Question No. 263.

Question No. 265 answered with Question No. 258.

Departmental Programmes

266. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the funding allocated to the sports capital programme 2019, 2020 and 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32527/21]

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

Due to the nature of the Programme it can take grantees a number of years to draw down grants. Details of all payments and allocations under the Programme are published on my Department's website <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/d13385-sports-capital-programme/#sports-capital-programme-applications-allocations-and-payments>. The available annual funding for the Programme is contained within the relevant estimates volumes.

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. 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. It is intended to allocate a minimum of €40m under this round of the Programme.

Departmental Programmes

267. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the projects that have been successful in their application to the large scale sport infrastructure fund in 2019, 2020 and 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32528/21]

268. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of the large-scale sport infrastructure fund; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32529/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): I propose to take Questions Nos. 267 and 268 together.

The National Sports Policy published in 2018 provided for the establishment of a Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF). The aim of the fund is to provide support for larger sports facilities where the Exchequer investment is greater than the maximum amount (€300,000) available under the Sports Capital and Equipment Programme. The National Development Plan provided a capital allocation of at least €100m over the period to 2027 for the Fund.

The first allocations under the Fund were announced at the beginning of 2020 and approximately €86.4m has been awarded to 33 proposals to date. Details of these projects can be found at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/4113b3-large-scale-sport-infrastructure-fund-ssif/>

These projects are at various stages of a due diligence process and formal grant agreements have now issued to a number of the successful applicants.

While it is not proposed to open the LSSIF for new applications at present, my Department is undertaking a review of the LSSIF which is expected to be complete in the near future. This review will consider, inter alia, progress on all existing grants and whether any additional grants should be awarded including to previously unsuccessful applicants. The timing of any new call for proposals will also be considered. Any new allocations or a new call for proposals, will be considered in the context of the review of the National Development Plan.

Question No. 268 answered with Question No. 267.

Covid-19 Pandemic

269. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will report on the removal of the ban on guided tours; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32566/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Under the current COVID-19 Regulations, taking account of public health advice, indoor guided tours are not permitted. However, in line with the provisions for small outdoor events, outdoor guided tours are permitted for up to 15 participants (not including those present in a professional capacity – e.g. the tour guide).

The Government is due to meet later this month to decide on the next phases in the easing of restrictions, subject to the evolving public health situation and continued good progress in the vaccination programme. I am hopeful for the safe resumption of indoor guided tours in July along with the planned resumption of organised indoor events, subject to maintaining progress with the virus.

Covid-19 Pandemic

270. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the cost of holding the test concert in the Iveagh Gardens on 11 June 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32604/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The first pilot event, in a series of events to roll out over June and July, was curated by the National Concert Hall and saw James Vincent McMorrow and Sorcha Richardson perform in the Iveagh Gardens in Dublin.

The OPW partnered with my Department and the NCH to deliver this concert and there was no charge for the use of the Iveagh Gardens as this was a Government approved pilot event. My Department will provide a grant to the NCH to cover the costs of the pilot events over and above the ticket receipts. I am happy that the grant provided for much needed employment for the crews and artists involved. Details of costs are currently being finalised and I expect it to be in the region of €130,000.

The feedback from the audience, artists and crews working at the Iveagh Gardens event was very positive given that it was the first live music event of any scale in 15 months. As it was the first event the numbers were intentionally small to help us review event management protocols and we will build on capacities as we move through the summer in a safe and controlled manner. I will continue to keep these matters under review as the pilots progress and as public health guidance evolves.

Covid-19 Pandemic

271. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if the Office of Public Works provided the use of the Iveagh Gardens to the National Concert Hall for free; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32605/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The first pilot event, in a series of events to roll out over June and July, was curated by the National Concert Hall and saw James Vincent McMorrow and Sorcha Richardson, perform in the Iveagh Gardens in Dublin. The OPW partnered with my Department and the NCH to deliver this concert and there was no charge for the use of the Iveagh Gardens as this was a Government approved pilot event.

The feedback from the audience, artists and crews working at the Iveagh Gardens event was very positive given that it was the first live music event of any scale in 15 months. As it was the first event the numbers were intentionally small to help us review event management protocols and we will build on capacities as we move through the summer in a safe and controlled manner. I will continue to keep these matters under review as the pilots progress and as public health guidance evolves.

Covid-19 Pandemic

272. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the number of HSE public health staff who worked at the test concert in the Iveagh Gardens on 11 June 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32606/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Following the recent Government decision to prepare for the safe reopening of live cultural, sporting and entertainment events, my Department has prepared a programme of pilot live events for June and July. This broad programme includes sporting, cultural and live entertainment events, both indoors and outdoors. These pilot events will allow for sports, arts, culture and entertainment organisations to test necessary control and other measures in venues across a range of settings and have been designed to inform the safe reopening of these sectors. They will be subject to ongoing review including with respect to the prevailing public health situation.

As part of the preparations for the events, my Department has worked and continues to work with representative bodies and stakeholders from the culture, sport and live event sectors on the programme of events.

The events are being organised with venue operators and promoters who are submitting Event Management Plans to my Department which are reviewed by Health and Safety consultants. There was no requirement to have HSE staff at the Iveagh Gardens concert. I will continue to keep these matters under review as the pilots progress and as public health guidance evolves.

Departmental Expenditure

273. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the amount her Department and associated agencies have spent on social media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32622/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): My Department uses social media to promote the wide range of schemes and programmes operated under its auspices and it uses digital content to support engagement with citizens and communities across Ireland.

Effective communication with the public and stakeholders is essential in achieving the Department's goals, particularly in relation to programmes such as Creative Ireland which is a culture-based, all-of-government initiative that aims to place creativity at the centre of public policy and public life. The core proposition of the Programme is to engage citizens and communities in creativity, recognising that personal and collective participation in creative activity has significant implications for individual, community and societal wellbeing. The Programme uses *inter alia* digital platforms to deliver its core proposition principally through the Creative Ireland website and social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram). The Programme has incurred costs of €563.46 on paid social media advertising from January 2021 to date. In addition, Culture Ireland spent €211.40 on advertising with Facebook for online promotion of the St. Patrick's Week Programme called SEODA.

Information on social media advertising spend by agencies of the Department is not held centrally. I am contacting the Agencies in this regard and I will forward the information to the Deputy in accordance with the timelines set out in Standing Orders.

Departmental Expenditure

274. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport

and Media the amount her Department has spent on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32639/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Effective communication with the public and stakeholders is essential in achieving my Department's goals. The Department uses social media, amongst other channels, to promote the wide range of schemes and programmes operated under its auspices and it uses digital content to support engagement with citizens and communities across Ireland. Total costs of €47,829.65 (ex VAT) were incurred by my Department for the production of social media content between January and 12 June 2021.

Departmental Expenditure

275. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the amount her Department and all associated agencies have spent on public relations consultancy costs since January 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32656/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I have been informed by officials that no funding has been allocated to or contracts entered into for public relations services by the Department. My Department is actively engaged in delivering communications with the public and with stakeholders through various channels. This work is carried out in-house by the communications team and other teams within the Department. Communications activities are very important to the work of my Department, and cost effectiveness is always a factor in my Department's plans. In relation to agencies, this information is not held centrally by the Department. I am contacting the Agencies in this regard and I will forward the information to the Deputy in accordance with the timelines set out in Standing Orders.

Departmental Policies

276. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will outline her key policy achievements in her Department since 27 June 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32726/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): My Department has a wide-ranging remit across a number of sectors that contribute significantly to our economy while also supporting individual and community well-being right across Ireland. Many of these sectors have experienced severe impacts due to the global Covid-19 pandemic and associated public health measures my Department has continued to make significant progress across all areas of its brief. Further information in relation to policy announcements, consultations and schemes is available on my Department's website at (<https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/department-of-tourism-culture-arts-gaeltacht-sport-and-media/>)

I have recently been able to join with my Government colleagues in making a series of positive announcements in relation to the safe and successful reopening of our society including the reopening of the hospitality and tourism sector; returning to in-person cultural and sporting events; the easing of restrictions on sports and dance training; and the reopening of galleries, museums and libraries.

Following on from the Budget 2021 which included funding of €130m for the Arts Council, €104.5m for Sport Ireland, over €30m for Screen Ireland, over €78m the Gaeltacht and Irish language sector and €40.733m for TG4. There was a record level of funding for Tourism overall in Budget 2021, an increase of €59 million over 2020 allocation, to just under €221 million (€220.9 million).

Specific policy achievements include:

- The establishment of a Tourism Recovery Oversight Group and an Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce and ensuing oversight group, to chart a sustainable path for recovery of Ireland's tourism, arts, culture and entertainment sectors.

- Secured an extensive package of supports for the functions under the remit of her Department in the July 2020 Jobs Stimulus Package.

- The inclusion in budget 2021 of a €55m support fund for strategic tourism businesses and €5m for training and digitalisation support in the sector.

- €26m COVID-19 Adaptation Fund for tourism and hospitality business.

- €10m Coach Business Continuity Scheme.

- €10m Ireland Based Inbound Agents Business Continuity Scheme.

- These measures complement the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme, Pandemic Unemployment Payment and Covid Restrictions Support Scheme schemes and the ReStart scheme.

- The new €17m Outdoor Dining Enhancement Scheme being delivered in partnership between Fáilte Ireland and Local Authorities across the country. This scheme is providing funding for tourism and hospitality business to develop and increase their own outdoor seating capacity, and will also provide funding to local authorities to develop permanent outdoor public dining spaces in towns and urban centres, similar to those that exist in various European cities.

- Announcement of a Basic Income Guarantee pilot scheme for artists, as part of the Government's National Economic Recovery Plan. This was the number one recommendation from artists and the sector through the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce Report-Life Worth living. My Cabinet colleague Minister Heather Humphreys in the Department of Social Protection and I will be developing a proposal for the Basic Income guarantee pilot scheme by July. This is an unprecedented move and I anticipate that the pilot scheme will involve a significant number of artists.

- A Covid-19 funding package of €88.5m was provided in 2020 to support the sport sector. This significant investment benefited all levels of the sport sector, including thousands of grassroots clubs across the country.

- An allocation of €5.9million in Dormant Accounts Funding for a wide range of sport and physical activity measures countrywide, focusing on people with disabilities, people who are educationally disadvantaged and from disadvantaged communities.

- A new High Performance Strategy for the Sporting sector, to be launched in the coming weeks.

- The Live Performance Support Scheme for 2021, under which €25m is being provided to support employment and wellbeing opportunities across all genres of live entertainment and the continued production of high quality artistic output for the public.

- Launch of the Music and Entertainment Business Assistance Scheme under which a fund of €14m is available to businesses in the live entertainment sector that have been significantly negatively affected by COVID-19 restrictions.

- The continued safeguarding and modernisation of institutions through the National Cultural Institutions (NCIs) Investment Programme in the National Development Plan, an ambitious programme of capital investment across all of our NCIs which will ensure that they can continue their legacy of providing engaging cultural and artistic offerings to the people of Ireland. The National Development Plan also includes funding for a cultural and creativity investment programme.

- The 2020 round of the Sports Capital and Equipment Programme closed for applications on the 1st March. Assessment work is underway with allocations expected later this year. Work is also advancing on projects being funded under the Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund.

- The progress of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill, which is now undergoing pre-legislative scrutiny.

- The publication of a full suite of guidelines in relation to the safe resumption of activities across the tourism, hospitality, sport and cultural sectors.

- The announcement of a series of outdoor pilot events in sports and live entertainment to provide for the safe return of spectators and audiences.

- The establishment of a language planning fund worth €3.4m in total for Údarás na Gaeltachta and Foras na Gaeilge to maintain the operation of the language planning process in the current year

- The progress of the Official Languages (Amendment) Bill which has now passed Committee Stage in Dáil Éireann.

- Public consultation on the designation of certain sporting and cultural events as being of major importance to society and to ensure that they are available on free to air television service on a live or deferred basis.

- The establishment of the Future of Media Commission jointly with the Taoiseach, securing additional funding for TG4 and securing of Government approval for the integration of the Broadcasting (Amendment) Bill into the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill.

- The establishment of a Night Time Economy Taskforce, the final report of which I intend to bring to Government shortly.

In addition to sector specific supports, my Department and I have worked closely across Government to ensure that COVID-19 horizontal supports reflect the needs of the sectors under the aegis of the Department, and the combination of sector specific and horizontal supports are detailed in the Government's recently published Economic Recovery Plan.

The policy initiatives to date reflect a strong combination of measures to support key sectors throughout the pandemic, as well as longer term policy initiatives in response to Programme for Government commitments, and that aim to chart a sustainable future for the sectors under the aegis of my Department.

Equality Issues

277. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the way in which her Department and agencies under her remit are working towards enabling access to employment for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities, including, but not limited to, persons with disabilities, persons from ethnic minorities, Travelers, Mincéirí; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32748/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): In the context of meeting its obligations, under Section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act 2014, to have regard in performing its functions of the need to eliminate discrimination and to promote equality of opportunity and treatment for staff, my Department is working towards increasing access to employment in the Department for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities on a number of fronts.

As a civil service employer, my Department operates an equal opportunities employment policy. Recruitment of the vast majority of staff in my Department is via the Public Appointments Service (PAS). My Department is supportive of current PAS recruitment initiatives that seek to appoint persons from diverse backgrounds to posts in the civil service.

I am informed that, in particular, my Department has a strong record of employing persons with disabilities. My Department conducted a staff census for 2020 to assist monitoring of the number of employees with disabilities, as required under the Disability Act 2005. Almost 10% of staff in my Department self-identified in this census as having a disability as defined by the Act. Separately, my Department is currently accommodating a trainee from the Oireachtas Work Learning Programme (OWL) for persons with intellectual disabilities. It is also in the process of recruiting up to four graduates with disabilities from the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) work placement programme which aims to promote access to the labour market for graduates with disabilities and build the capacity of employers to integrate disability into the mainstream workplace.

I am also informed that, while my Department does not currently monitor staff numbers by other minority status, it is progressing an action plan developed under its Diversity and Inclusion Policy that includes a number of measures intended to foster an inclusive work culture that will support diversity in workforce makeup. Amongst these measures is the roll out of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) training to staff, and the completion of a staff EDI attitudes survey. All staff also have access to my Department's well-being programme, to the civil service employee assistance service, and to the Department's Disability Liaison Officer: All of these services are designed to assist with integration and inclusivity.

With regard to the Agencies under my Department's remit, this is an operational matter for the respective Agencies. In that context, I will forward your question to the relevant Agencies and bodies, under the aegis of my Department, and request them to respond directly to you on the matter. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Defective Building Materials

278. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the progress in relation to the defective concrete blocks grants scheme for counties Donegal and Mayo. [32475/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The regulations for the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant scheme came in to operation on 31 January 2020. The Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks in Construc-

tion (Remediation) (Financial Assistance) Regulations 2020 provide for a grant scheme of financial assistance to support affected homeowners in the counties of Donegal and Mayo only, to carry out the necessary remediation works to dwellings that have been damaged due to the use of defective concrete blocks. The scheme opened for applications at the end of June 2020.

Budget 2021 provides funding of €20 million to fund the operation of the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant scheme for the counties of Donegal and Mayo. As of 11 June 2021, a total of 448 “Stage 1 - Confirmation of Eligibility” applications have been made, of which 296 have been approved. Following confirmation of eligibility there is an inevitable time lag before Stage 2 applications are submitted by applicants as remedial works plans are developed and estimates from contractors are secured. A total of 44 applications for “Stage 2 - Grant Approval” have been made, of which 16 have been approved.

Engagement between my Department, the local authorities and local action groups will continue in relation to any improvements in supports to affected homeowners. In this regard, I have proposed a timebound working group, with representatives from my Department, the local authorities and homeowner representative groups, to review and address any outstanding issues in relation to the operation of the Defective Concrete Block Grant Scheme, including issues such as grant caps, homeowner contributions, engineering and allowable costs etc. I propose that the recommendations of this working group will inform any changes or improvements to the scheme as may be required, which I will bring forward in conjunction with my Government colleagues, and in particular in consultation with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and the Attorney General.

Housing Provision

279. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he anticipates initiating any actions or reform with a view to ensuring that the housing market is tilted in favour of the provision of affordable housing accommodation to first time home seekers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32780/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): The Programme for Government commits to putting affordability at the heart of the housing system. Delivery on this commitment is evidenced in the new measures contained in the Affordable Housing Bill 2021, currently before the Oireachtas, which provides for three schemes that will increase the supply of affordable homes through (1) affordable homes on local authority lands, (2) the introduction of a new form of tenure in Cost Rental, and (3) a new affordable purchase shared equity scheme.

Affordable homes on local authority lands are to be made available through the support of the €310 million Serviced Sites Fund (SSF). Information on the schemes that have received approval in principle under the Serviced Sites Fund are available at:

<https://rebuildingireland.ie/news/minister-murphy-gives-the-go-ahead-for-ten-local-authority-sites-for-affordable-housing-under-the-serviced-sites-fund/>, and

<https://rebuildingireland.ie/news/minister-murphy-approves-funding-of-e84m-to-support-delivery-of-1770-affordable-homes-under-the-ssf/>.

In addition to the 35 SSF projects referenced in the links above, approval in principle has also been given to five additional projects - Emmet Road and Oscar Traynor Road (Dublin City Council), Shanganagh (Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council), Hayestown and Ballymas-tone (Fingal County Council).

Cumulatively, these 40 SSF projects, across 14 local authorities, will assist in the delivery of just over 4,400 affordable home to buy or rent. My Department continues to engage with local authorities to progress both current and potential projects, with the first SSF project to deliver affordable homes for purchase under the SSF later this year being the Boherboy project in Cork City.

In making an application for SSF funding, each local authority must demonstrate that an affordability issue exists in the area in question and that it is viable to deliver homes, for purchase or rent, with a price reduction of at least 10% below open market values, with the reduction remaining as fully-repayable equity charge against the property. The scheme is targeted at first-time buyers, with some limited exceptions as outlined in the Affordable Housing 2021 Bill.

In addition to the affordable homes to be delivered through the SSF, Budget 2021 allocated €75 million for the Affordable Purchase Shared Equity Scheme, which is aimed at first-time buyers buying a new-build home on private land. It will help these first-time buyers secure their own home by bridging the gap between the mortgage available to them and the price of the home they want. Work on the detailed design of the proposed scheme is ongoing and at an advanced stage.

The Affordable Housing Bill will also place a new form of tenure in Cost Rental on a statutory basis for the first time. Cost Rental directly links rents to the cost of provision rather than market dynamics. Three initial Cost Rental projects are already underway. The first Cost Rental homes in Ireland, 50 two-bedroom apartments at Enniskerry Road, Stepaside, will be delivered by the Tuath and Respond Approved Housing Bodies in Quarter 3 2021. Dublin City Council is also progressing a site at Emmet Road, Inchicore (the former St Michael's Estate), and the LDA is collaborating with Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council on a site at Shanganagh, Shankill.

The provision of Cost Rental housing is also being implemented through the new Cost Rental Equity Loan (CREL) scheme, which was allocated €35m in Budget 2021. I approved in principle the financing this year of 390 new homes across eight sites, located in Dublin, the Greater Dublin Area, and Cork. CREL support and careful cost management has generated initial rents which are at least 25% below comparable open market prices, delivering significantly improved affordability for renters.

In addition to the aforementioned measures in the Affordable Housing Bill 2021, the Land Development Agency (LDA) is tasked to work with Government Departments, local authorities, state agencies and other stakeholders to assemble strategic sites in urban areas and ensure the sustainable development of social and affordable homes for rent and purchase. On establishment, the LDA had access to an initial tranche of 8 sites that have near term delivery potential for approximately 3,400 new homes. In partnership with Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council, the LDA has been granted planning permission for the development of 597 homes on a site in Shanganagh. Approximately 34% of the units will be for social housing, 51% will be cost rental and 15% will be for affordable purchase. Work has commenced on the construction tender process, with construction anticipated to start in the second half of 2021. Information on the work of the LDA is available at: <https://lda.ie/>.

On the 4th May last, the Government also approved the drafting of amending provisions to Part V of the Planning and Development Act 2000, for inclusion in the Affordable Housing Bill 2021 as Committee Stage amendments. This will see an increase in the current 10% social housing requirement related to all new housing developments to a mandatory 20% for social and affordable requirements.

Other affordability measures, such as the Help to Buy Scheme, and the Rebuilding Ireland

Home Loan, are already available to eligible purchasers nationally to make home ownership more affordable.

The Help to Buy Scheme may return tax paid in the previous four years to eligible first-time buyers, up to a maximum amount of €30,000, for a new home. Information is available at: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/property/help-to-buy-incentive/index.aspx>.

The Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan enables credit worthy first time buyers to access sustainable mortgage lending to purchase new or second-hand properties in a suitable price range. There are no set minimum income limits; however, applicants do need to have sufficient borrowing and repayment capacity and must be capable of repaying the mortgage. Further information on the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan is available at <http://rebuildingirelandhomeloan.ie/>.

Finally, I can confirm the Government's upcoming Housing strategy 'Housing for All' will detail an extensive range of measures and ambitious targets to underpin the delivery of affordable housing over the coming years.

Defective Building Materials

280. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if provisions will be made to extend the pyrite remediation scheme to counties Mayo and Donegal; if his Department has engaged with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31852/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Pyrite Resolution Act 2013 provides the statutory framework for the establishment of the Pyrite Resolution Board and for the making of a pyrite remediation scheme to be implemented by the Board with support from the Housing Agency.

The provisions of the Act apply only to dwellings affected by significant damage attributable to pyritic heave consequent on the presence of reactive pyrite in the subfloor hardcore material and not to damage arising in any other circumstance, e.g. such as pyrite in concrete blocks.

The pyrite remediation scheme is a scheme of "last resort" for affected homeowners who have no other practical option to obtain redress and is limited in its application and scope. The full conditions for eligibility under the scheme are set out in the scheme which is available on the Board's website, www.pyriteboard.ie.

The scheme is applicable to dwellings, which are subject to significant damage attributable to pyritic heave established, in accordance with I.S. 398-1:2017 - Reactive pyrite in sub-floor hardcore material – Part 1: Testing and categorisation protocol. In this regard, it is a condition of eligibility under the scheme that an application to the Board must be accompanied by a Building Condition Assessment with a Damage Condition Rating of 2. Dwellings which do not have a Damage Condition Rating of 2 are not eligible to apply under the scheme. This ensures that, having regard to the available resources, the focus of the scheme is on dwellings which are most severely damaged by pyritic heave. There are no proposals to provide for further financial assistance outside of the scheme.

Any proposal to amend the scheme is, in the first instance, a matter for the Pyrite Resolution Board and any such proposal would require detailed consideration of the evidence. The recommendations of the Pyrite Panel, which informed the establishment of the pyrite remediation scheme, were premised on a number of pertinent factors.

As a minimum, in order to consider the appropriateness or otherwise of amending the scheme, I understand that the Board would require a report addressing the following information: -

- the extent and severity of damage to dwellings in the local authority area caused by pyritic heave in the subfloor hardcore;
- verification, if available, that the damage has been caused by pyrite;
- the background to the occurrence of the damage;
- details of any structural warranty policies for the dwellings;
- the history of the estate's construction, numbers, type of dwellings etc;
- the source of the hardcore supplied to dwellings in the estate; and
- any supporting geological assessments.

In addition to the above, the Board may also make such further enquiries as it considers necessary in order to assist it in considering the matter. In this regard, it would be advisable for the residents to confirm the nature of the pyrite problems in the area and that any problems identified stem from reactive pyrite in the subfloor hardcore material which is giving rise to pyritic heave and consequential significant pyritic damage.

In regard to the Deputy's specific question, my Department has not engaged with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in relation to extending the pyrite remediation scheme to counties Mayo and Donegal.

Local Authorities

281. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the recent changes to household means policy 2021 issued in April take into account recent changes in circumstances; if not, if the net average income average over the past 52 weeks applies without discretion.; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32523/21]

282. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a change in a person's financial circumstances due to the impact of Covid-19 can be taken into account when assessing income criteria; if not, if the previous 52 weeks nett income must be considered. [32524/21]

283. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the discretion councils can apply when assessing income limits regarding the qualifying criteria for inclusion on the social housing list. [32525/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 281, 282 and 283 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.

The 2011 Regulations prescribe maximum net income limits for each local authority, in different bands according to the area concerned, with income being defined and assessed accord-

ing to a standard Household Means Policy. The 2011 Regulations do not provide local authorities with any discretion to exceed the limits that apply to their administrative areas.

Under the Household Means Policy, which applies in all local authorities, net income for social housing assessment is defined as gross household income less income tax, PRSI, Universal Social Charge and Additional Superannuation Contribution. The Policy provides for a range of income disregards, and local authorities also have discretion to decide to disregard income that is temporary, short-term or once-off in nature.

The determination of whether an applicant household meets the income criteria is based on a calculation of their preceding 12 months' net average income prior to the date of receipt of application. This ensures that the most comprehensive picture of a household's current and previous income is available at the point of carrying out the assessment.

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

In relation to the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), Circular 38/2020 regarding the treatment of the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) when assessing and/or reviewing income eligibility for social housing support was issued to local authorities. The Circular advises that the PUP payment should be considered as temporary in the overall context of an applicant household's income. In this regard, when assessing a household, the household's income immediately prior to receipt of the PUP should be considered by the authority. Based on all of the available income information, the authority must then make a decision as to whether the household meets the income criteria.

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

Question No. 282 answered with Question No. 281.

Question No. 283 answered with Question No. 281.

Defective Building Materials

284. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to provide additional financial support under the pyrite remediation scheme to help homeowners cover the cost of initial investigative tests for pyrite; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32533/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Pyrite Resolution Act 2013 provides the statutory framework for the establishment of the Pyrite Resolution Board and for the making of a pyrite remediation scheme to be implemented by the Board with support from the Housing Agency.

The provisions of the Act apply only to dwellings affected by significant damage attributable to pyritic heave consequent on the presence of reactive pyrite in the subfloor hardcore material and not to damage arising in any other circumstance, e.g. such as pyrite in concrete blocks.

The pyrite remediation scheme is a scheme of "last resort" for affected homeowners who have no other practical option to obtain redress and is limited in its application and scope. The full conditions for eligibility under the scheme are set out in the scheme which is available on

the Board's website, www.pyriteboard.ie.

The scheme is applicable to dwellings, which are subject to significant damage attributable to pyritic heave established, in accordance with I.S. 398-1:2017 - Reactive pyrite in sub-floor hardcore material – Part 1: Testing and categorisation protocol. In this regard, it is a condition of eligibility under the scheme that an application to the Board must be accompanied by a Building Condition Assessment with a Damage Condition Rating of 2. Dwellings which do not have a Damage Condition Rating of 2 are not eligible to apply under the scheme. This ensures that, having regard to the available resources, the focus of the scheme is on dwellings which are most severely damaged by pyritic heave. There are no proposals to provide for further financial assistance outside of the scheme and any proposal to amend the scheme is, in the first instance, a matter for the Pyrite Resolution Board.

The Board may be contacted by phone at Lo call 1890 252842 or by email to: info@pyriteboard.ie, or alternatively at: oireachtasinfo@pyriteboard.ie.

Defective Building Materials

285. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the changes that have been introduced with respect to the regulation and monitoring of product standards for building blocks since the publication of the Report of the Expert Panel on Defective Blocks in 2017; the measures put in place to ensure that the widespread use of such defective blocks in counties Donegal and Mayo will be prevented in the future; and the role the National Building Control Office now has with respect to ensuring the highest possible standards for building blocks and all other construction material used in residential housing developments. [32560/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): In relation to the concrete blocks, the relevant suite of harmonised standard facilitating specification of masonry units is the EN 771 (series). '*I.S. EN 771-3:2011+A1:2015*' deals with aggregate concrete masonry units. In this regard, the National Standards Authority of Ireland (NSAI), has published additional guidance in the form of '*S.R. 325:2013+A2:2018/AC:2019 Recommendations for the design of masonry structures in Ireland to Eurocode 6*' which sets out appropriate minimum performance levels for specific intended uses of, *inter alia*, EN 771(series) in Ireland.

In respect of aggregates for concrete, NSAI has published '*S.R. 16:2016 Guidance on the use of I.S. EN 12620:2002+A1:2008 - Aggregates for concrete*' which outlines the precautions to be taken in the quarry to reduce the risk of harmful impurities in aggregate production, including the requirement for independent third party oversight of factory production control by a Notified Body (a designated body that carries out third-party tasks).

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 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.

Wastewater Treatment

286. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the Ministerial consent regarding the wastewater treatment plant in Arklow County Wicklow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32568/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Since 1 January 2014, Irish Water has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels. The prioritisation and progression of individual projects is a matter for determination by Irish Water.

As part of Budget 2021, funding of over €1.4 billion was secured to support water services. This includes €1.3 billion in respect of domestic water services provision by Irish Water. This overall investment will deliver significant improvements in our public water and wastewater services, support improved water supplies right across Ireland, including rural Ireland, and support a range of programmes delivering improved water quality in our rivers, lakes and marine area.

Under the Water Services Act 2013, Irish Water is required to seek the consent of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage - given with the approval of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform - to enter into capital commitments. Irish Water must seek Ministerial consent prior to entering into any individual capital commitment of a value in excess of €20m. This is a financial control and not a project consent.

In the context of the updated Public Spending Code for evaluating, planning and managing the public investment in the project as it proceeds through its lifecycle, consideration is also being given to the appropriate application of the Code having regard to the current lifecycle stage of the project. In this regard, the Final Business Case under the Public Spending Code as submitted by Irish Water on 28 May 2021, together with a NewERA report received on 14 June 2021, are currently under active consideration. Given the significant investment by the tax-

payer, this does involve close scrutiny by my Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. Irish Water expects construction work to begin in the second half of 2021.

Irish Water has established a dedicated team to deal with representations and queries from public representatives. The team can be contacted via email to oireachtasmembers@water.ie or by telephone on a dedicated number, 1890 578 578.

Housing Policy

287. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding declaring a housing emergency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32571/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Government set out its housing priorities in the Programme for Government across numerous areas, including homelessness, affordable home ownership, public and social housing, the Land Development Agency, rent reform and planning and my Department is focused on moving those priorities forward.

In addition to the housing priorities set out above, the Government will establish a Commission on Housing to examine issues such as tenure, standards, sustainability, and quality-of-life issues in the provision of housing

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to deliver 50,000 new social homes with a focus on new build homes. The delivery of new build social housing has been increasing steadily in recent years, from 52% of total social housing output in 2016 to 65% in 2020. Subject to the impact of COVID-19 on delivery, a national target of 12,750 new social homes have been targeted for 2021, of which 9,500 are new Build homes.

Affordability is recognised as a key challenge in the Irish housing market. This Government is committed to ensuring that affordable, quality housing solutions are available to everyone in Irish society and this is reflected in the Programme for Government. The Programme commits to putting affordability at the heart of the housing system through the progression of State-backed affordable housing.

The Affordable Housing Bill is currently progressing through the Oireachtas and this Government has committed funding of €620 million in affordable housing measures in Budget 2021 alone.

We are taking a multi-pronged approach to the housing crisis using multiple routes across both the short term and long term to boost supply and open up affordability. Our policies include:

- A new equity scheme where the state takes a stake in your home lowering the mortgage costs.
- A new Affordable Purchase scheme with the state directly building affordable homes.
- A retained and expanded Help to Buy scheme.
- A new Cost Rental scheme.
- Launching the LDA with a major affordable housing mandate.

I intend to publish a new Housing Strategy ‘Housing for All’ later this year and this is being developed at the moment using a whole of Government approach. The delivery of more social and affordable homes will be a key focus in the Plan. The new strategy will set out details of social housing delivery for 2021-2025, including social housing targets for 2022 onwards.

Property Registration

288. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the way a form 5 application by a person (details supplied) can be progressed in view of the circumstances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32595/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): To acquire title by adverse possession, an applicant must establish the nature of the interest claimed in the property and show how that interest has devolved to the applicant. To do this, the applicant must show that specific persons dispossess the original owner; those specific persons must enter into possession, excluding the true owner and all others; exercise such acts of ownership, use and enjoyment to amount to exclusive possession, with an intention of acquiring the title of the original owner and in a manner inconsistent with the title of the original owner.

If possession/occupation of property which is the subject of an adverse possession application is by permission, there is no adverse possession, as the applicant would be unable to fulfil the above-mentioned requirements for registration. However, if following rejection, an applicant has any further information that could establish that they did not have permission to enter possession of the property, they may wish to re-lodge the application and the new application will be treated on its own merits.

Otherwise, it is open to an applicant to appeal a decision of the Property Registration Authority to court pursuant to Section 19 of the Registration of Title Act 1964.

Departmental Expenditure

289. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount his Department and associated agencies have spent on social media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32616/21]

290. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount his Department has spent on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32633/21]

291. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount his Department and all associated agencies have spent on public relations consultancy costs since January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32650/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 289, 290 and 291 together.

The information requested is being compiled and will be forwarded to the Deputy in accordance with Standing Orders.

The details requested in relation to bodies under the aegis of my Department are a matter for the individual bodies concerned and are not collated or retained by my Department.

Arrangements have been put in place by each organisation to facilitate the provision of information by State Bodies directly to members of the Oireachtas. The relevant contact email address for each organisation, to which members may address queries, are set out in the following table:

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

Question No. 290 answered with Question No. 289.

Question No. 291 answered with Question No. 289.

Construction Industry

292. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if an application by a company (details supplied) will be approved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32667/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Changes in relation to building material costs are monitored and recorded by the Central Statistics Office (Wholesale Price Index for Building & Construction Materials). Issues relating to increases in construction costs generally and measures to address such issues, are matters for my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform, whose Department convenes the Construction Sector Group to support regular and open dialogue between Government and industry on how best to achieve and maintain a sustainable and innovative construction sector positioned to successfully deliver on the commitments in Project Ireland 2040.

Given my own Department's role in relation to public housing, we of course are concerned with regard to construction costs and recognise that significant material cost increases can result in increased tender costs. In this regard, we continually monitor tender cost trends through ongoing engagement with colleagues in local authorities and through engagement with other Departments and the Society of Chartered Surveyors Ireland. My Department continues to

work with each local authority to ensure that projects are developed and progressed in a cost effective manner.

In relation to the specific project mentioned, it is primarily one for resolution between the developer and the local authority concerned. I understand that the Council and the developer are currently in discussions on this matter.

Climate Action Plan

293. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the current and capital costs involved with each action item in the Interim Climate Action Plan under his Department's responsibility. [32699/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): As part of the Climate Action Plan, my Department is implementing a range of ambitious decarbonisation actions for housing, planning, marine and natural heritage protection and analysis of Ireland's climate.

Actions which are regulatory in nature are subject to the normal Regulatory Impact Assessment procedures and activities under the National Development Plan (NDP) are budgeted for through the normal budgetary processes at implementation stage.

The Project Tracker for Project Ireland 2040 Investment Programmes and Project Tracker can be found on the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/6db7c4-investment-projects-and-programmes-tracker/>.

Public Consultations undertaken by my Department containing Regulatory Impact Assessments can be found on the following link:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/search/?type=consultations&organisation=department-of-housing-local-government-and-heritage>.

A review of the NDP to reflect the major priorities set out in the Programme for Government is also well underway. These priorities are aimed at tackling the most important challenges facing us as a nation including Climate Action. The renewed NDP will set out a capital investment framework until 2030. It will seek to ensure that Exchequer capital investment aligns with the acceleration in decarbonisation now required.

The national objective of transitioning by 2050 to a competitive, low-carbon, climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable economy and society must influence public capital investment choices over the next ten years. On account of the inherently cross-sectoral and integrated nature of the decisions required in such areas as transport, energy, agriculture and the built environment, addressing climate change is a unique challenge for public policy.

National Biodiversity Plan

294. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the current and capital funding allocated to the National Biodiversity Data Centre. [32706/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): The National Biodiversity Data Centre is operated on contract and managed under the aegis of the Heritage Council, which is funded by my Department. Ar-

rangements have been put in place by all bodies under the aegis of my Department to facilitate the provision of information directly to members of the Oireachtas. This provides a speedy, efficient and cost effective system to address queries directly to the relevant bodies. The contact email address for the Heritage Council is oireachtas@heritagecouncil.ie.

Departmental Policies

295. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will outline his key policy achievements in his Department since 27 June 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32720/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): My Department’s website is a good source of information about activities and initiatives undertaken but by way of illustration, in addition to significant initiatives undertaken to manage the impact of COVID-19 and to prepare for Brexit, some of the key actions delivered since 27 June 2020 include:

- the extension of the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan;
- the extension of the Pyrite Remediation Scheme to include the administration area of Limerick;
- the development of a new Cost Rental Equity Loan;
- the delivery of the largest voids programme to date;
- an increased budget to support local authority homeless programmes and Covid-19 enhanced services;
- the commencement of work on the strategy for social housing delivery, including target setting, for the 2022-2025 period as part of the Department’s lead role in the development of the new Housing for All strategy;
- the establishment, with the Department of Rural and Community Development, of a Town Centre First inter-Departmental Group (IDG) on the regeneration of towns and villages;
- increased funding for the Built Heritage Investment Scheme and the Historic Structures Fund;
- the prioritisation of the Maritime Area Planning Bill and the Land Development Agency Bill;
- the establishment of the Regulatory Authority for Approved Housing Bodies;
- the development of the Marine Spatial Plan;
- the development of the National Marine Planning Framework;
- the development of the Affordable Housing Bill;
- the approval of the General Scheme of a Bill to separate Irish Water from the Ervia Group;
- the publication of the General Scheme of an Electoral Reform Bill to establish an Electoral Commission, modernise the electoral registration process and introduce regulation of online political advertising;

- the continued development of the 'Housing for All' initiative; and
- the commencement of a strategic review of the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

The Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, is the foundation for my Department's main policy initiatives. The Department has commitments across 10 of the 12 Missions in the Programme. The Department's Statement of Strategy for the period 2021-2025 was published in April 2021 and sets out our strategic goals, objectives and actions for the period ahead. It is available on the Department's website at the following link <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/9a047-statement-of-strategy-2021-2025/>.

Equality Issues

296. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit are working towards enabling access to employment for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities, including, but not limited to, persons with disabilities, persons from ethnic minorities, Travellers, Mincéirí; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32742/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department complies with all central policy and guidance in relation to equality of opportunity in all of our employment practices. The vast majority of external recruitment for my Department is carried out by the Public Appointments Service and any additional recruitment undertaken by my Department is done in compliance with the terms of the recruitment licence issued to us by the Commission for Public Service Appointments.

Under the Disability Act 2005, public service bodies have a duty to promote and support the employment of people with disabilities and to ensure that at least 3% of their employees are people with disabilities. In addition, the Department has a statutory requirement to maintain accurate records on the number of staff with disabilities. To meet this requirement, on an annual basis, staff are requested to declare, confidentially, if they have a disability. In 2020 the percentage of staff working in my Department with a declared disability was 6%.

In terms of supporting equality and access to employment for all, additional measures within my Department include:

- Participation in the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) programme since 2018 offering graduates with disabilities a 6 month work placement within the Department. This programme is a collaboration between the Irish Civil Service and AHEAD (Association for Higher Education Access and Disability).

- Support for the Job Shadow Day initiative on an annual basis, as part of the national project which brings people with disabilities and local employers together for one day; for the last number of years my Department has teamed with the Walkinstown Association for People with an Intellectual Disability (WALK). Due to Covid-19 we were not asked to participate in 2020.

- In 2020 my Department partnered with the North East Inner City Programme to provide a placement for a local student in its Custom House office. These placements have been paused as part of public health restrictions during the COVID 19 pandemic but the Department remains committed to the programme.

- In 2020 my Department introduced its Universal Design and Accessibility Policy and Action Plan, which aims to demonstrate the Department's commitment to accessibility, the prin-

ciples of Universal Design and reasonable accommodation for people with disabilities.

- During 2020 and 2021, my Department ran Disability Awareness Training and Autism Awareness Training, supporting our commitments under the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021.

- My Department has a Disability Liaison Officer who provides additional support to staff with disabilities on an ongoing basis, providing reasonable accommodations as appropriate.

The details requested in relation to bodies under the aegis of my Department are a matter for the individual bodies concerned. Arrangements have been put in place by each Agency to facilitate the provision of information by State Bodies directly to members of the Oireachtas. The contact email addresses for each agency are set out in the table below.

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

Archaeological Sites

297. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps he is taking in response to the need for accelerated archaeological studies of Doon Point, County Kerry which is under threat from coastal erosion; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32753/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): The archaeological excavations at Doon Point were carried out by the CHERISH Project Team- CHERISH (Climate, Heritage and Environments of Reefs, Islands and Headland) is a 6 year European funded Ireland-Wales project. The excavations were carried out under an excavation licence granted by my Department and NMS Archaeologists inspected the excavations while they were taking place. I look forward to receiving the report of these excavations in due course and to the results of the excavations and analysis feeding into policy development to better protection of coastal heritage.

Representatives of the NMS are on the relevant CHERISH Advisory Committee and CHERISH representatives sit on my Department's Climate Change Planning Team which is overseeing delivery of the Sectoral Adaptation Plan for Built and Archaeological Heritage through the formulation and implementation of measures designed to better understand the impact of climate change on vulnerable heritage.

Natural Heritage Areas

298. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to ensure that Garrylucas bog, County Cork is designated as a natural heritage area immediately; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32754/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): There are 630 proposed natural heritage areas, including the area to which the Deputy refers. While a review of these sites is foreseen, the current focus of my Department is on fulfilling Ireland's obligations under the EU Habitats and Birds Directives and the designation of Natura 2000 sites, i.e. special areas of conservation and special protection areas.

Although proposed natural heritage area sites are not subject to the protection provisions of the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000, they may be recognised in local authority development plans.

Passport Services

299. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when a passport will issue to a person (details supplied) considering that the application was received by the passport office some time ago; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32597/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Passport service has been in direct contact with the applicant referred to in the Deputy's question.

The Passport Service commenced the scaling up of operations on 4 May 2021 in line with the phased easing of restrictions set out in "COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 – The Plan Ahead".

The Service has been focused since then on four priority areas.

- Clearing the COVID-19 backlog of 89,000 passport applications.
- Processing all adult renewal applications (including new applications) within 10 working days.
- Processing urgent and emergency applications.
- Providing of customer services through phone and web chat.

Substantial progress has been made in clearing the COVID-19 backlog of 89,000 passport applications. In summary 52,000 of these passports have been issued so far. Our phone and web chat services are available to all people whose passport applications have unfortunately been affected by COVID-19 restrictions.

Departmental Expenditure

300. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the amount his Department and associated agencies have spent on social media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32614/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department engages in public awareness advertising where there is important information that needs to be brought to the attention of citizens.

With the UK's departure from the EU at the beginning of 2020 it was important to highlight the substantial and lasting changes for businesses that were to come into effect at the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020 and into 2021. This Brexit Communications campaign focused on business readiness, and encouraging those who trade with, or through, the United Kingdom (excluding Northern Ireland), to take action and avail of information and resources available at Gov.ie, to limit the disruption to their business.

Expenditure in 2021 on the social media elements of the Brexit readiness campaign were €143,510. While the costs of both the 2020 and 2021 campaigns were borne by my Department, this is a whole of Government campaign that was prepared and executed in partnership with other Government Departments and Agencies, in particular, the Department of the Taoiseach. Additionally a number of other Government Departments and Agencies ran related and focused sectoral campaigns in their areas of responsibility which were funded directly by those Departments and Agencies. Our digital outreach will continue to be an important channel of communication and, as we move to a new phase of assisting businesses adapt to the permanent changes that Brexit has brought about, the new "Brexit Ready Ireland" brand will be used to support our communications activities.

My Department and its Embassy network has also engaged in promotion on social media of certain other initiatives and projects that relate to Ireland's foreign policy activities.

Expenditures is outlined in the table below:

Date	Campaign	Vendor	Campaign Activities	Costs
Jan-21	Get Ireland Brexit Ready, 2020	PHD Media	Brexit Readiness Nov/Dec 2020	€ 70,746
Jan & March-21	Get Ireland Brexit Ready, 2021	PHD Media	Brexit Readiness January; Exporters campaign March	€ 72,764
Jan-21	DFA	Twitter	Travel advice	€ 326
Feb-21	Global Citizenship Strategy consultation process	Twitter	Global Citizenship Strategy	€ 242
Mar-21	International Women's Day	Twitter; Facebook	Campaign promotion	€ 247
Jan-June- 21	Missions expenditure	Facebook; Instagram	Diplomatic network initiatives and projects that relate to promoting Ireland's foreign policy objectives	€ 1,576
				€ 145,901

Departmental Expenditure

301. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the amount his Department has spent on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32631/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department produces content

for social media as part of information campaigns at home and overseas that promote Ireland's economic, political and cultural interests and to engage with the Global Irish community. In 2021, expenditure on content production for initiatives included marking Ireland's membership of the UN Security Council, St. Brigid's Day, St. Patrick's Day, a video marking the role of women in peace and security, Africa Day and a strategy for the Nordic region.

Expenditure video production, animation, graphic design and content translation for social media purposes in 2021 to date is listed in the table below.

Date	Campaign	Cost
Feb-21	Iveagh House virtual tour edits and drone footage	€ 1,779
Jan-Mar 2021	UN Security Council assets	€9,680
Jan-Feb 2021	St Brigid's Day assets	€1,514
Mar-21	Women, Peace and Security video production	€ 12,173
Apr-21	St Patrick's Day 2021 video production and assets including external footage	€ 132,510
May-21	Ireland/Wales Shared Statement and Action Plan 2021-25 footage	€ 340
May-21	Africa Day video production	€ 28,364
May-21	Ireland's Support for Girls' Education video production and post production	€ 1,285
Jun-21	A Strategy for the Nordic Region to 2025 video production	€ 3,223
		€ 190,868

Departmental Expenditure

302. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the amount his Department and all associated agencies have spent on public relations consultancy costs since January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32648/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department does not employ persons or firms to deal with public relations and has not incurred expenditure in this area.

Climate Action Plan

303. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the current and capital costs involved with each action item in the Interim Climate Action Plan under his Department's responsibility. [32697/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): The Interim Climate Action Plan presents a number of supporting and enabling actions to advance Ireland's international role on climate issues. These actions are necessary to support our efforts to coordinate and scale up our international climate finance and to enhance our climate diplomacy efforts.

Ireland provides significant international climate finance, the vast majority of which is targeted towards Least Developed Countries and Small Island Developing States. This targeting remains a commitment in the Interim Climate Action Plan. In 2019, the latest year for which figures are available, the Government of Ireland provided at least €93.6 million in climate finance. The Department of Foreign Affairs provided the largest proportion of this finance, approximately €71.3 million.

A full breakdown of Ireland's international climate spending can be found in *Ireland's Climate and Environmental Finance Report 2019*.

In line with the Programme for Government and Ireland's International Development Pol-

icy, A Better World, the Interim Climate Action Plan contains a number of commitments to be led by the Department of Foreign Affairs, including:

- seek to at least double the percentage of Official Development Assistance spending by 2030;
- the establishment of a Climate Finance Roadmap to be developed with other Departments;
- report annually on Official Development Assistance Expenditure on climate;
- the development and implementation of a methodology for climate proofing all Official Development Assistance;
- the development of a Department of Foreign Affairs Climate Strategy.

These important actions require significant technical expertise, to be provided through external support. I have set aside a provision of €150,000 in 2021 for these actions.

The cost of other actions in the Interim Climate Action Plan are integrated within the operational costs of the Department. This includes:

- placing climate action, especially for Least Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States, at the heart of our development cooperation and policy partnerships;
- strengthening climate diplomacy across HQ units and our Embassy network;
- playing a leadership role on Climate and Security at the UN Security Council.

Departmental Policies

304. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will outline his key policy achievements in his Department since 27 June 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32718/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Since the publication of the Programme for Government my Department has delivered against a number of the priorities and policy commitments contained therein. Earlier this year my Department published its new Statement of Strategy for the 2021-2023 period which outlines in more detail the key priorities for the next three years and how we will deliver meaningful outcomes for Irish citizens, at home and abroad, and how we will use and grow our influence around the world.

My Department is working to protect the island of Ireland from the worst effects of Brexit. As the inextricably linked histories of Ireland and Britain enter a new phase, we will foster enhanced links between our States to protect and strengthen our bilateral relations. This is supported by the opening of our new Consulate General of Ireland for the North of England next month. Medium-term strategic exercises with both Scotland and Wales have been launched this year - Ireland Scotland Joint Bilateral Review 2021-25 and Ireland Wales Shared Statement 2021-2025.

Ireland is a committed member of the European Union and my Department has been continually working with European colleagues to assist each other during this time of crisis, and as we rebuild our economies. This work will continue and deepen throughout the remainder of 2021 and beyond. Earlier this month I launched the *Global Ireland: A Strategy for the Nordic Region* which provides a framework for deepening our bilateral and multilateral engagement

with our like-minded Nordic partners.

The Government continues to work to strengthen relations and develop alliances with all EU Member States with which we share common goals and interests. This includes the ongoing implementation of our Strategies for France and Germany. The *German-Irish Joint Plan of Action*, involving a number of Government Departments, was renewed in early 2021 and provides an important avenue for continued cooperation. A similar Joint Plan of Action with France is currently being drafted.

Recognising the significance of the transatlantic relationship between Ireland and the US, we are strengthening our diplomatic, cultural, and economic relationship with the US at all levels and will continue to act as a bridge in the transatlantic relationship between the EU and US. Work has continued on implementing *Ireland's Strategy for the US and Canada 2019-2025* across our network of Missions in the US, ensuring a strong, coherent and visible presence for Ireland's economic and cultural footprint.

Through our membership of the UN and the EU, Ireland actively supports the promotion of democratic values, the rule of law and multilateralism, as key principles underpinning Irish foreign policy. Ireland has continued to promote and uphold these values and principles since taking our seat as an elected member of the UN Security Council for the two year period 2021/22. Ireland has strongly supported closer cooperation between the UN and the EU, as well as other multilateral organisations, and continues to participate in initiatives of the Alliance for Multilateralism (AfM) grouping. We have also championed respect for international law, including International Human Rights Law and International Humanitarian Law, in our engagement across the agenda of the Council. Ireland has been active in integrating the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda into work across the different country and thematic files. Ireland serves as co-chair of the UN Security Council Informal Expert Group on WPS.

Ireland's Overseas Development Assistance programme is an essential element of our overall foreign policy and national presence overseas, enabling the country to respond to complex human needs and humanitarian crises around the world. The Government is committed to reaching our goal of contributing 0.7% of GNI on overseas development cooperation, and our work to implement the Sustainable Development Goals. In 2020, we have been able to pivot some additional development support to address the impact of COVID19 on the most vulnerable in the world and will, over the rest of 2021, continue this effort to support investment in public health. My Department has also supported calls for action on debt and debt treatment, where necessary, to speed up post-COVID19 recovery and to support the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

We are providing support for those countries that are poorest and most vulnerable to climate shocks and ensure that climate change is included as a core theme in strategy development where Ireland has a significant development cooperation programme including Small Island Developing States. As a small island nation ourselves, we are leading by example in protecting our oceans and emphasising climate action as a priority in our multilateral engagement. In 2021, my Department's dedicated Climate Unit will develop a Climate Strategy for the DFA and coordinate a Climate Finance Roadmap in consultation with other Government Departments by which to double, at least, the overall percentage of Ireland's Overseas Development Assistance that counts as climate finance.

Delivering first class consular and passport services to our citizens remains an essential priority. My Department was at the forefront of supporting Irish citizens overseas at the outbreak of the pandemic and in the assessment of travel restrictions as a key component of Government to address the impact of COVID. The Passport Office continued to deliver an essential service

to citizens throughout the period of restrictions, during which they also contributed to the national contact tracing effort.

Our global diaspora remain an integral part of the wider Irish family and my Department is continuing to work with them in maintaining and deepening this vital relationship. In November 2020, my Department published a new *Diaspora Strategy* as part of a series of measures to strengthen our relationship with the diaspora to 2025.

Continuing to overcome the challenges that the COVID19 pandemic presents to the health and well-being of our citizens remains a priority for Government. My Department has developed strong information flows across Government on global developments which have informed critical decision making. We will continue contribute to economic recovery as we move to the next phase in 2021.

Our Missions abroad are charged with promoting Ireland, identifying new markets and opportunities for Irish business, and protecting and supporting Irish citizens. We are continuing to implement the *Global Ireland Strategy* which includes the commitment to double our global footprint by 2025. In 2021, alongside the new Consulate General in the north of England, we are planning to open new Embassies in Morocco, the Philippines and the Ukraine.

Equality Issues

305. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit are working towards enabling access to employment for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities, including, but not limited to, persons with disabilities, persons from ethnic minorities, Travellers, Mincéirí; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32740/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department is fully committed to progressing the values of diversity and inclusion, promoting a fair and equal workplace for our people and ensuring that our staff and workplace are representative and reflective of the people and society we serve.

Within my Department, a Sub-Committee of the Management Board on Gender, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion has been in place since 2012, chaired by two members of the Management Board. The Sub-Committee is a key governance structure for the consideration of gender, equality, diversity and inclusion issues, as outlined in the Employment Equality and Equal Status Acts. Five voluntary staff Working Groups – on Gender, LGBT+, New Irish and Ethnic Diversity, Parents and Carers and Social Inclusion and Disability sit under the Sub Committee. The Sub-Committee, in cooperation with Human Resources Division and other units of my Department, progresses initiatives and run regular events to promote equality and diversity at home and through our Mission network overseas.

These initiatives include promoting awareness and understanding of the Department, including employment opportunities, to as wide an audience as possible. On 27 May 2021, for example, my Department hosted a public event to mark Africa Day on ‘Recruiting Diverse Talents of African Descent for Public Jobs’, in partnership with the Public Appointments Service (PAS) and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. Further, the staff led Working Group on Social Inclusion, in partnership with Human Resources Division, are in contact with the North East Inner City Initiative (NEIC) with a view to the Department’s participation in NEIC’s Flash Mentoring Programme commencing this Autumn.

Under broader public outreach activities including *Global Ireland 2025’s Global Schools*

programme, my Department also arranges visits to second-level schools by a diplomat and member of the Defence Forces who has served on peacekeeping duties overseas. The programme involves my Department, the Department of Education and Skills, the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces in a joint collaboration to build awareness about Ireland's place in the world and to generate conversations about global citizenship. The Department pays close attention to ensuring a broad spectrum of schools are visited, including DEIS schools, to ensure broad interest in and awareness of a potential Foreign Service or Defence Forces career. Unfortunately the programme is currently paused during the current pandemic given the pressure all schools are under. However, it is hoped to resume it in the last quarter of the year.

My Department will continue to expand our outreach efforts to ensure that we reach those groups who continue to be under-represented in our Department including persons with disabilities, persons from ethnic minorities, Travellers, Mincéirí. The Department's Human Resources Strategy 2019-2022 has a focus on equality, diversity and inclusion as one of its four pillars, underscoring our commitment to the development of this agenda. One area, in particular, that my Human Resources Division is currently prioritising is the issue of recruitment. In late 2020, a staff survey was conducted to ascertain views from staff on building diversity through both external and internal recruitment in the Department. Arising from this feedback, and a review of current practices in place, a new Action Plan on Building Diversity through Recruitment will be presented to the Management Board shortly.

In respect of persons with disabilities, my Department is fully committed to equality of opportunity in all its employment practices in line with the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 and the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024. The Department continually engages with disability services to provide training and awareness courses for staff covering areas as defined under the Disability Act 2005 and ensures that staff members with disabilities are accommodated in our workplace by utilising our trained Disability Liaison Officer. The Department also conducted an Access and Sensory Audit of the Passport Service in 2020. Further, my Department is a supporter of the Willing, Able and Mentoring (WAM) programme and has supported 11 placements to graduates with disabilities since the programme commenced in 2006. My Department's contribution was acknowledged by the Association of Higher Education and Disabilities (AHEAD) and a plaque awarded to DFA under the WAM Leader Awards in 2019 and 2020.

There are no Agencies under the remit of my Department.

Defence Forces

306. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence the steps he will take to investigate the serious allegations of sexual abuse in the Defence Forces over the years made in writing to him by former members of the Defence Forces. [32578/21]

307. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence the responsibility he has to help sexual abuse victims who were abused when they were members of the Defence Forces; and if he or the Defence Forces authorities have a duty of care for such victims, male or female; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32579/21]

309. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence if the Defence Forces authorities investigate allegations of sexual abuse within the Defence Forces themselves or if they refer them to An Garda Síochána for investigation in all cases. [32581/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 306,

307 and 309 together.

All members of the Defence Forces, Permanent and Reserve, have a right to be treated with respect, equality and dignity and to carry out their duties free from any form of sexual harassment, harassment or bullying. These unacceptable forms of behaviour are not tolerated in the Defence Forces.

The Military Authorities have advised me that there are robust measures and systems currently in place within the Defence Forces to address any allegations of inappropriate behaviour in the workplace. Defence Force Regulation A7, in the first instance, provides the regulatory framework for dealing with such matters for serving members of the Defence Forces in both a formal and informal way through a trained Designated Contact Person (DCP) network.

Within this framework, Administrative Instruction A7, Chapter 1 sets out the Defence Forces policy and procedures regarding interpersonal relationships in the Defence Forces including sexual harassment, harassment and bullying, in order to deter unacceptable behaviour and promote a service environment based on mutual respect, equality and professionalism.

Where the alleged victim and the alleged suspect of inappropriate behaviour of a possible criminal nature, are both serving members, a complaint may be made directly to the Military Police. Depending on the nature of the case, such complaints may be referred to an Garda Síochána. Cases involving a civilian, whether a former member of the Defence Forces or not, are matters appropriate for investigation by an Garda Síochána.

I urge those who may have suffered serious wrong of a criminal nature to report their concerns to an Garda Síochána who have the lawful authority, skills and resources to investigate and to prosecute such matters and to treat all of those in this process with dignity and respect, especially those who come forward with traumatic detail.

The need to care for the well-being of its members is a priority for the Defence Forces and in this regard, the Personnel Support Service (PSS) is in place for the use of members and their immediate family, The Brigade PSS Office and Occupational Social Worker network in each Brigade/Formation supports Defence Forces personnel and their families in times of crisis and general difficulty. Services include the provision of information and advice on areas including stress management, counselling and referral options.

Question No. 307 answered with Question No. 306.

Defence Forces

308. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence the correspondence his office has received from a person (details supplied) in the past five years; the action that has been taken on foot of the serious allegations contained in same; if he or his officials passed the files and correspondence on to An Garda Síochána for investigations or to the Defence Forces Ombudsman; and if so, if he enquired as to the stage at which the investigations into the allegations by An Garda Síochána or the Defence Forces Ombudsman are at. [32580/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): A serving member of the Defence Forces may avail of a number of processes to pursue any complaint or allegation in relation to their treatment or experiences within the Defence Forces. Where the alleged victim and the alleged suspect are both serving members, a complaint may be made to the Military Police. Depending on the nature of the case, such complaints may be referred to an Garda Síochána. Cases involving a civilian, whether a former member of the Defence Forces or not, are matters appropriate

for investigation by an Garda Síochána.

Subject to conditions set out in the Ombudsman (Defence Forces) Act 2004, serving and former members of the Defence Forces may avail of the services of the Ombudsman for the Defence Forces for pursuing complaints. There is no provision within the Act for the Minister to refer matters to the Ombudsman.

The Minister may refer information received by him to an Garda Síochána for investigation and if done so, the matter is then subject to their independent investigative process.

It is not appropriate for the Minister to comment on the circumstances of individual cases.

Question No. 309 answered with Question No. 306.

Departmental Expenditure

310. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Defence the amount his Department and associated agencies have spent on social media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32609/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department has spent the following on social media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021:

Promoted tweets for Be Winter Ready Campaign: €2,760.78

Promoted tweets for Be Summer Ready Campaign: €598.54

Total spend: €3,359.32

Departmental Expenditure

311. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Defence the amount his Department has spent on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32626/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department has not spent anything on social media content during 2021 to date.

Departmental Expenditure

312. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Defence the amount his Department and all associated agencies have spent on public relations consultancy costs since January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32643/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department has not had any spend on public relations consultancy since January 2021.

Departmental Policies

313. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Defence if he will outline his

key policy achievements in his Department since 27 June 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32713/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Programme for Government contains an ambitious range of commitments concerning the Defence sector that my Department will continue to implement over the lifetime of the Programme.

One of the key commitments was to establish a Commission on the Defence Forces. On the 15th December 2020, the Government approved terms of reference and the membership of an independent Commission on the Defence Forces. This Commission subsequently commenced their work and will continue to work throughout 2021 with their report due in December 2021. The work of the Commission will inform the future development of the Defence Forces.

The Defence Organisation has played a significant role in the State's overall response to the Covid 19 pandemic. The response has involved the Department of Defence, the Defence Forces and Civil Defence, having regard to their specific roles. The Defence Organisation has participated in a number of official groups such as the High Level Task Force for Covid 19 Vaccination. In addition to supporting the HSE, the Defence Forces have also provided a broad range of supports to other Departments and Agencies. Provision of this support will continue to remain one of my Department's main priorities for 2021.

Implementation of projects arising from the White Paper on Defence (2015) has continued. In total, of the initial 95 projects, 47 are now formally completed. An additional 5 new projects will be initiated during 2021. I have also approved the commencement of a further 15 projects in the period 2022 to 2025. The three year implementation plan for "Civil Defence - Towards 2030" has been approved and is being implemented and other Public Sector Initiatives have been progressed.

My Department has progressed a number of activities including recruitment and retention in the Defence Forces, and related HR issues. Central to this was the continued implementation of the High Level Implementation Plan "Strengthening Our Defence Forces". A range of other recruitment initiatives have been introduced including commissioning from the ranks, the re-entry of former PDF personnel with specific skills and a sea-going service commitment scheme for members of the Naval Service. In addition, a range of direct entry specialist competitions have also been initiated as a further means to fill critical positions.

An organisational capability review of the Department of Defence commenced in 2021. The Review is being conducted by the Organisational Capability Review team which is based in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and will involve engagement with Departmental staff and key stakeholders in the policy and operational domains of the Department.

The Department of Defence and Defence Forces Strategy Statement 2021-2023 was published in April 2021 and comes at a pivotal time for the Defence Organisation with the establishment of the Commission on the Defence Forces and the Organisational Capability Review of the Department of Defence. This Strategy Statement will be subject to a mid-term review.

In relation to international initiatives, my Department's main focus since June 2020 has been Ireland's policy input regarding the establishment of the European Peace Facility (EPF) which is a new mechanism to finance Common Security and Defence Policy activities. The Council decision establishing the EPF was adopted in March 2021. In addition, my Department continues to provide initial policy input into the process around the EU's Strategic Compass which was proposed to enhance and guide the implementation of the Level of Ambition arising out of the EU's Global Strategy. These two EU initiatives will require further policy input by my Department in 2021.

Since June 2020 with the successful outcome for Ireland in achieving a UN Security Council seat, additional structures have been established between the Departments of Foreign Affairs and Defence and the Defence Forces with a view to greater coordination on peacekeeping policy issues. This will continue to be a priority for my Department and the Defence Forces throughout 2021.

The 10th Be Winter Ready public safety campaign was launched in November 2020. My Department has also overseen the launch of a new Be Summer Ready public safety campaign. Under the chairmanship of my Department, the Government Task Force on Emergency Planning adopted the SEM Guideline 4 - Climate Change Adaption document. My Department also published The National Risk Assessment for Ireland 2020. The National Risk Assessment identifies and assesses the likelihood and impact of key risks facing the State across a broad range of emergencies. It will also form part of the EU-wide risk assessment process.

My Department will continue to implement the rolling 5 year Infrastructure Plan and rolling 5 year Equipment Development Plan for the Defence Forces. A step change in military air-based capability is being achieved through the delivery into service of the Pilatus PC-12 aircraft. The original order of three aircraft, which were delivered in September 2020, was augmented on an urgent basis by an additional aircraft delivered in April 2020 to enhance fixed wing capacity to meet demands arising from Covid-19. Other major equipment projects are also being progressed and delivered. Climate action has been integrated into equipment & infrastructure programmes of work and this will continue in 2021.

In relation to legislation, the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2020 and the Defence Forces (Evidence) Bill 2019 were restored to the Dáil Order Paper. The Second Stage and Committee Stage debates on the Defence (Amendment) Bill were subsequently completed during 2020. My Department received approval from Government to introduce Report Stage amendments to the Defence (Amendment) Bill to provide for the possible deployment of members of the Reserve Defence Force on voluntary military service (both within the State and overseas). These are enabling provisions to give effect to commitments in the Programme for Government subject to the recommendations by the Commission on the Defence Forces. The necessary amendments are currently been finalised.

I am satisfied that significant progress is being made in implementing the Government's ambitious programme for Defence and I look forward to ongoing delivery of key commitments.

Equality Issues

314. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Defence the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit are working towards enabling access to employment for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities, including, but not limited to, persons with disabilities, persons from ethnic minorities, Travellers, Mincéirí; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32735/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department promotes a fair, tolerant and inclusive work place. It is fully committed to equality of opportunity and this is a fundamental value espoused in its People Strategy. Civil servants in my Department are recruited through the Public Appointments Service, which has diversity and inclusivity as a central element in its recruitment practices. Recruitment to my Department is therefore open to all applicants, and reasonable accommodation to support the employment of people with disabilities is afforded to those requesting it.

The officials in my Department are supported in working in a safe, inclusive environment through a Dignity at Work policy and through a range of learning and development opportunities, including unconscious bias training. There are also additional supports available through the Civil Service Employee Assistance Service and the Department Disability Liaison Officer. My Department has undertaken, where practicable, to promote and support the employment of people with disabilities.

Through its various policies and strategies, the Defence Forces take all reasonable steps to provide an inclusive workplace environment, free from harassment, intimidation and bullying and where dignity and respect are afforded to all. In addition, a Transgender Policy Working Group has been established and is currently progressing the development of a Transgender Employment Policy for the Defence Forces.

A Committee, led by the Department of Justice and Equality, has been established to oversee and monitor progress on the implementation of the LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019-2021. Nominees from my Department and from the Defence Forces have been appointed to this Committee. The first meeting was held on 16 June 2020, with representation from the Defence Organisation in attendance at all subsequent meetings.

Overseas Study Placements

315. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education the options open to students wishing to pursue third-level studies overseas in view of the fact that leaving certificate results will not be available until 3 September 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32522/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): On 17 February, I confirmed that Leaving Certificate 2021 examinations would proceed, guided by public health advice, and that students will also have the alternative option of applying for grades accredited by the State Examinations Commission (SEC), to be known as SEC-Accredited Grades. This decision was taken by government to ensure for every candidate in 2021, a method to assess their learning and attainment at the end of their post-primary education, and to progress to higher and further education, and the world of work.

Leaving Certificate results for 2021 are expected to issue directly to candidates through the Candidate Self Service Portal on Friday 3 September.

The written examinations began on 9 June and will run until 17 June in the case of Leaving Certificate Applied and 29 June in the case of Leaving Certificate (established).

Candidates have been provided with the choice of sitting the examinations, opting to receive Accredited Grades or both on a subject by subject basis. This dual process, believed to be unique in the world, was put in place following consultation with stakeholders in response to the disrupted learning experienced by the class of 2021 during the periods of school closures in 2020 and 2021.

In any subject where a candidate sits the examination and opts to receive an Accredited Grade, they will be credited with the better of the two results.

Putting in place both the examinations and a corresponding measure of SEC-Accredited Grades recognises the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic and the loss of learning that has occurred for this group of students due to the interruption of in-person teaching and learning during the periods of school closures.

Notwithstanding the huge effort and collaboration by teachers, school leaders and of course students, in relation to the examinations and Accredited Grades process over the last number of months, the timeframes for finalisation of results are particularly challenging this year. This is in part due to the fact that the SEC has to manage both the examinations and Accredited Grades processes in parallel.

The results issue date this year, 3 September, must take account of both the examinations marking process and the Accredited Grades process operating in parallel and being brought together at the end to issue to candidates. To ensure the accuracy and the integrity of the results being provided to candidates, sufficient time must be allowed not only in the parallel operation of both of these complex processes but also in the integration of the results to ensure that candidates are provided with a set of examinations results that comprises, based on their individual options on a subject by subject basis, examination results, Accredited Grades or the better of the two.

A range of checking and robust quality assurance procedures apply to the resulting and grading processes for the examination results and Accredited Grades focussed on maintaining data integrity and on identifying and reconciling candidate information. Given the robust quality assurance checks associated with the resulting process and in the integration of both the Accredited Grades and written examinations, It is of vital importance that the processes are given sufficient time to execute to the highest standards.

Candidates' results will be transferred to the CAO at the earliest opportunity to facilitate the generation of offers to CAO applicants. The CAO have announced that Round 1 offers will be made on 7 September.

For those Leaving Certificate candidates who have applied to pursue their higher education in UK Universities, the UCAS deadline for acceptance of conditional offers is 8 September 2021.

In 2020, along with the UK, countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark, Poland and Hungary showed flexibility in working with the Department to accommodate Irish students, when results issued on 7 September 2020.

The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has already been engaged with these countries, as has my own Department, and both Departments will continue their work to ensure that the same flexibility will be extended to the 2021 Leaving Certificate candidates.

It is important that candidates who have applied for places in universities and colleges outside of Ireland should engage with the institutions to which they have applied as early as possible to notify them of the results date and to confirm their position.

School Accommodation

316. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to a planning application (details supplied) adjacent to existing school and proposed school campus; if her Department has considered making an offer to purchase this site; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32532/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The site referred to by the Deputy is not currently for sale and owner is seeking planning permission to develop the site for residential development. My Department did previously make contact with the owner expressing an inter-

est in acquiring the property. However, it did not prove possible to acquire the property.

Defibrillators Provision

317. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of ensuring there is a defibrillator in every primary school, secondary school and special school. [32534/21]

318. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education her plans to ensure that there is a defibrillator in every school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32538/21]

319. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if there funding is currently available for schools to apply to purchase a defibrillator. [32539/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 317, 318 and 319 together.

Under the provisions of the Education Act 1998, the Board of Management is the body charged with the direct governance of a school.

The decision to install a defibrillator is made at local school level and is a matter for the board of management of each individual school.

The wider question of the need for defibrillators to be made available in public places is primarily a public health matter and would therefore be a matter for the Department of Health.

Question No. 318 answered with Question No. 317.

Question No. 319 answered with Question No. 317.

State Examinations

320. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education her plans to accommodate leaving certificate students who experience a medical emergency such as a seizure immediately before or during their exam, are unable to complete their exam and wish to re-sit that exam within the same exam cycle or before such a time that CAO offers are issued. [32546/21]

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

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

Schools Building Projects

321. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education if planning permission is not required to erect pre-fabs in a school (details supplied); the regulation under which it is considered exempt; if her Department has sought a section 5 declaration from Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council to confirm the exemption if this is the case; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32558/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The instillation of interim accommodation on the school site to which the Deputy refers is considered exempt under Planning Exemption Class 20D (S.I. No. 114/2021 - Planning and Development Act 2000 (Exempted Development) Regulations 2021).

A Section 5 Declaration is not a requirement of utilising the above exemption.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

322. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Education if primary schools will continue to receive grant funding to cover the additional financial burden of cleaning and sanitary work during the Covid-19 pandemic in the 2021-2022 school year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32565/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Government published the Roadmap for the Full Return to School, along with details of a financial package of over €375 million to support the implementation of the measures in the roadmap, following approval by Government.

The range of supports being made available to all schools in the free education scheme include additional financial supports to provide for Cleaning, PPE and hand hygiene costs under the COVID-19 response plans.

To date €121.9m of capitation supports have been made available to schools which includes €73.1m to fund PPE/Hand Sanitiser requirements and €48.8m for additional cleaning requirements.

The Department will continue to review the position over the coming months and it is intended that details of any grant payments for the 2021/22 school year, will be made available as soon as possible.

Departmental Correspondence

323. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Education her plans to address the issue described in correspondence (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32585/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): In accordance with Department Circular 0031/2011 teachers must be qualified and registered to teach in the sector to be eligible for the qualified rate of pay.

The teacher referred to is registered under Route 3 with the Teaching Council which allows her to work in a further education setting. If she was teaching in a mainstream post primary school she would receive the unqualified rate of pay and would have her contract terminated on the recruitment of a qualified post primary teacher or the 31st of August which ever happens first as she is not qualified and registered Route 2 post primary for the sector. The Teaching Council under Teaching Council (Registration) Regulations 2016 Revised define further education as follow:

“further education” means qualified to teach students in recognised schools who are normally 16 years of age and older and who are attending education and training settings outside the post-primary schooling but which are not part of the third-level system;”

Circular 0003/2018 which was published in January 2018 did not change the existing rules in relation to eligibility criteria for posts of responsibility in voluntary post primary schools which were previously set out in Circulars/ppt05_02, Circulars/ppt06_02 and Circulars/ppt07_02.

All circulars are agreed under the auspices of the Teachers' Conciliation Council, a body established in accordance with the terms of the Conciliation and Arbitration Scheme for Teachers. The Council is composed of representatives of the teacher representative bodies, school management, the Department of Education and Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, chaired by an official of the Workplace Relations Commission.

School Admissions

324. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education further to Parliamentary Question No. 295 of 3 June 2021, the length of time it will take to secure a school placement for a student (details supplied) for September 2021 with particular reference to the fact that many of the schools which could accommodate the student and their needs are already oversubscribed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32589/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): In relation to the particular case raised by the Deputy, I understand that the relevant support services and agencies, including NEPS and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) are aware of the case and are working towards ensuring that the student can be reintegrated into a school placement.

The Deputy will also be aware that the NCSE has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide. NCSE continues to be available to provide support to this family.

Departmental Expenditure

325. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education the amount her Department and associated agencies have spent on social media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32610/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Department engaged in social media advertising in respect of the 2021 Leaving Certificate Accredited Grades and Examinations process and also to highlight the public health advice for all students in schools to students and their parents for the period outlined. The total cost of this was €24,367.93.

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

[Table]

Departmental Expenditure

326. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education the amount her Department has spent on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June

2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32627/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Department regularly produces information videos. These videos contain public health advice for the school community, addresses by the Minister on Department initiatives and information and guidance on Department initiatives. These may be published on its social media channels, provided directly to schools for their use, or both.

The Department engages the services of an external Irish Sign Language provider to provide interpreting services on relevant social media videos. This service is important for all those in the education sector who are deaf or hard of hearing.

For the period in question, the Department has incurred €5,129.40 in expenditure on the production of content that has been disseminated in several ways, including on social media.

Departmental Expenditure

327. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education the amount her Department and all associated agencies have spent on public relations consultancy costs since January 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32644/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Department has not incurred any costs in relation to public relations consultancy for the period outlined.

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

[Aegis Bodies]

School Equipment

328. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the report on the compulsory use of electronic devices at a school (details supplied); if the findings of the report will inform her policy on the use of electronic devices at secondary level; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32662/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Digital Strategy for Schools 2015–2020 *Enhancing Teaching Learning and Assessment* articulates the Department's current policy on the embedding of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment in schools. Its clear vision is focussed on realising the potential of digital technologies to enable our young people to become engaged thinkers, active learners, knowledge constructors and global citizens to participate fully in society and the economy. In developing this Strategy, the Department adopted an evidence-based approach including extensive research and consultation with education stakeholders including young people. A key support of the strategy is the Digital Learning Framework for teachers and school leaders, which was trialled in 50 schools during the 2017/2018 school year before being evaluated and improved and rolled out to all schools in September 2019. The Department has engaged the Educational Research Centre to undertake a three-year longitudinal study of the impact and efficacy of the Digital Learning Framework, and this study is expected to be completed in 2022. All schools are supported to develop a Digital Learning Plan, and have flexibility to determine how best to embed the use of digital

technologies in teaching and learning in their school to enhance teaching and learning, taking into account their individual circumstances and contexts. The Professional Development Service for Teachers Technology in Education (PDST-TIE), a Department funded support service, offers advice and supports to schools on digital learning. Advice sheets are available on digital technology in education, including on the adoption of laptops and tablets in schools. Digital learning in schools is also assessed by my Department's Inspectorate.

My Department is aware of the report referred to by the Deputy. However, decisions regarding the use and deployment of digital technology in schools are a matter for the Board of Management of each school. Schools are advised to consult with members of the school community including parents when planning for the introduction of digital technologies, including devices. The cost and other implications must be fully considered by the Boards of Managements before a decision is made. It is important for schools, in conjunction with parents, to retain local autonomy for decisions on the use of digital technology, including tablet devices, laptops, and learning platforms, and how best to manage their integration into classroom practice reflective of their own context and requirements.

While this spirit of partnership is in place in schools the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill will provide a mechanism for enhanced consultation on such matters in schools. This legislation provides a clear framework that schools will have to apply in their engagement with students and parents. One of the key concepts of the Bill is the need for a school to consult with students and their parents on individual school plans, policies and activities. The Bill completed all stages of the Seanad in late 2019. The Department of Education is currently awaiting an order for Second Stage in the Dáil.

As the current Digital Strategy for Schools expires at the end of the current school year (2020/2021), development of a new Digital Strategy is underway. An extensive consultation process has commenced with details available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/7d09a-digital-strategy-for-schools/>. All relevant research and reports will be reviewed as part of the process to develop the new strategy.

School Equipment

329. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Education the full budget allocated by her Department in each year since 2010, to secondary schools for the purchase and use of devices by students such as a device (details supplied) and tablets, laptops and so on or other forms of devices in tabular form. [32663/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As part of the €210m investment programme underpinning the implementation of the Digital Strategy for Schools, my Department provided €100m in grant funding to recognised primary, special and post-primary schools to address their ICT needs during 2020. This included €50m in respect of the 2020-2021 school year brought forward and issued in December 2020. Schools were advised that they can use this funding to support the continuity of teaching and learning should a period of partial or full school closure occur arising from Public Health advice owing to Covid-19 restrictions. The funding is intended to enable schools to implement their Digital Learning Plan through provision of appropriate infrastructure, and issues directly to schools as they are best placed to determine requirements for their own context and circumstances. This includes Desktop PCs, laptops, tablets or hybrid devices, projectors/flat screens, cloud-based tools and software applications, and learning platforms.

ICT annual grant funding

Date	Total
2009/2010 & 2010/2011	€92million
2016/17	€30million
2017/18	€30million
2018/19	€50million
2019/2020 & 2020-2021**	€100million

** Funding for the 2020-2021 school year was brought forward to issue in 2020 to support schools to deal with the impact of the pandemic.

Further information on criteria and the funding allocation applying can be found in the ICT Grant Circular 0077/2020, available on the Department's website.

The Professional Development Service for Teachers Technology in Education (PDST-TIE) offers advice and supports to schools on digital learning. Advice sheets are available on digital technology in education, including on the adoption of laptops and tablets in schools.

Primary schools can use the Minor Works Grant for the provision of ICT infrastructure, and general capitation that issues to schools can also be used for that purpose. New schools and school extension projects also receive funding for ICT infrastructure as part of their furniture and equipment funding.

Development of a new Digital Strategy is underway and an extensive consultation process has commenced with an open call for submissions, and questionnaires for practitioners, parents and learners. Further strands of the consultation will include engagement through focus groups. A Consultative Advisory Group has been established comprising key stakeholders representing parents, teachers, students and industry. Future funding measures to support schools in embedding the use of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment will be considered as part of that process.

School Equipment

330. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Education if her Department has a policy or plans to adopt any proposal on the usage of electronic devices in secondary schools; her views on the issue of which device should be preferred for junior certificate students; if a uniform approach will be implemented across all schools; and if a uniform platform such as the use of applications (details supplied) will be adopted by her Department; if not, if such choices will be left to individual schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32664/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Digital Strategy for Schools 2015–2020 *Enhancing Teaching Learning and Assessment* articulates the Department's current policy on the embedding of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment in schools. Its clear vision is focussed on realising the potential of digital technologies to enable our young people to become engaged thinkers, active learners, knowledge constructors and global citizens to participate fully in society and the economy. In developing this Strategy, the Department adopted an evidence-based approach including extensive research and consultation with education stakeholders including young people. A key support of the strategy is the Digital Learning Framework for teachers and school leaders, which was trialled in 50 schools during the 2017/2018 school year before being evaluated and improved and rolled out to all schools in September 2019. The Department has engaged the Educational Research Centre to undertake a three-year longitudinal study of impact and efficacy of the Digital Learning Framework, and this study, is expected to be completed in 2022. All schools are supported to develop a Digital

Learning Plan, and have flexibility to determine how best to embed the use of digital technologies in teaching and learning in their school to enhance teaching and learning, taking into account their individual circumstances and contexts. The Professional Development Service for Teachers Technology in Education (PDST-TiE), a Department funded support service, offers advice and supports to schools on digital learning. Advice sheets are available on digital technology in education, including on the adoption of laptops and tablets in schools. Digital learning in schools is also assessed by my Department's Inspectorate.

Decisions regarding the use and deployment of digital technology in schools are a matter for the Board of Management of each school. Schools are advised to consult with members of the school community including parents when planning for the introduction of digital technologies including devices. The cost and other implications must be fully considered by the Boards of Managements before a decision is made. It is important for schools, in conjunction with parents, to retain local autonomy for decisions on the use of digital technology, including tablet devices, laptops, and learning platforms, and how best to manage their integration into classroom practice reflective of their own context and requirements.

While this spirit of partnership is in place in schools the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill will provide a mechanism for enhanced consultation on such matters in schools. This legislation provides a clear framework that schools will have to apply in their engagement with students and parents. One of the key concepts of the Bill is the need for a school to consult with students and their parents on individual school plans, policies and activities. The Bill completed all stages of the Seanad in late 2019. The Department of Education is currently awaiting an order for Second Stage in the Dáil.

There is a range of educational software, apps and tools including devices available and schools have discretion in determining which to use depending on their own circumstances and requirements. Extensive support and guidance on the use of many of the most commonly used is provided by PDST-TiE. The provision of a uniform or centralised approach would require an extensive feasibility, scoping and procurement exercise to be undertaken, with ongoing support and maintenance required to enable implementation. Many schools will have determined which software, apps and tools including devices best meet their own needs in accordance with their circumstances and digital learning plan, and will have invested accordingly.

As the current Digital Strategy for Schools expires at the end of the current school year (2020/2021), development of a new Digital Strategy is underway. An extensive consultation process has commenced with details available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/7d09a-digital-strategy-for-schools/>. All relevant research and reports will be reviewed as part of the process to develop the new strategy.

School Equipment

331. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Education if she will introduce a grant aid scheme for parents in schools that enforce a compulsory use of device policy (details supplied) especially in schools in deprived areas and with low income households; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32665/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department provided €100m in grant funding to recognised primary, special and post-primary schools to address their ICT needs during 2020, the final issue of funding under the €210m investment programme underpinning the implementation of the Digital Strategy for Schools. This included €50m in respect of the 2020-2021 school year brought forward and issued in December 2020. Schools were advised

that they can use this funding to support the continuity of teaching and learning should a period of partial or full school closure occur arising from Public Health advice owing to Covid-19 restrictions. The funding is intended to enable schools to implement their Digital Learning Plan through provision of appropriate infrastructure. This includes Desktop PCs, laptops, tablets or hybrid devices, projectors/flat screens, cloud-based tools and software applications, and learning platforms.

Decisions regarding the use and deployment of digital technology in schools is a matter for the Board of Management of each school, as schools are best placed to determine the most appropriate solution to adopt in terms of supporting the learning needs of their students based on school's own context and circumstances, and in accordance with their Digital Learning Plan.

Schools are advised to consult with members of the school community including parents when planning for the introduction of digital technologies including devices. The cost and other implications must be fully considered by the Boards of Managements before a decision is made. It is important for schools, in conjunction with parents, to retain local autonomy for decisions on the use of digital technology, including tablet devices, laptops, and learning platforms, and how best to manage their integration into classroom practice reflective of their own context and requirements.

The Professional Development Service for Teachers Technology in Education (PDST-TIE) offers advice and supports to schools on digital learning. Advice sheets are available on digital technology in education, including on the adoption of laptops and tablets in schools.

The Department spends just over €150 million annually to provide a suite of supports to schools in the DEIS programme, of which €16.2 million, in the form of a DEIS grant was allocated to schools ahead of schedule for the 2020/21 school year. This is an annual grant to support learning in the context of DEIS for the academic year. In recognition of the difficulties faced by some students to engage with remote learning, at the time the grant issued last year all DEIS schools were informed by letter that they could consider using some of their DEIS funding to support pupils' learning, for example to arrange access to additional materials of supports for students during the move to remote teaching and learning caused by Covid-19. It is a matter for each individual school to determine how best to use this funding, but it is intended to support the objectives of the DEIS programme.

Schools are asked to be conscious of students who may not have access to online facilities or technology and to adapt approaches to ensure that these pupils' ability to participate in learning is not compromised. Many schools have already introduced a range of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of these pupils are catered for, including pupils who have limited access to technology or whose parents are not in a position to support their learning. The guidance sets out approaches that schools can take and my Department will be asking schools to ensure that there is a specific focus on ensuring that these pupils are supported. Schools in the DEIS programme are asked to use all available supports, both in-school and community-based, to promote a positive solution-oriented approach that will support all pupils to achieve, to learn and to progress in their education and to help minimise any further educational inequality among those at risk of educational disadvantage.

The development of a new Digital Strategy is underway and an extensive consultation process has commenced with an open call for submissions. Further strands of the consultation will include questionnaires to key stakeholder and engagement through focus groups. A Consultative Advisory Group has been established comprising key stakeholders representing parents, teachers, students and industry. Future funding measures to support schools in embedding the use of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment will be considered as part of

that process.

School Equipment

332. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Education if she has examined a study (details supplied); if the study and other studies will inform her policy on the advance use of electronic devices in schools especially given concerns regarding their use in aiding and hindering study and life skills; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32666/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Digital Strategy for Schools 2015–2020 *Enhancing Teaching Learning and Assessment* articulates the Department’s current policy on the embedding of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment in schools. Its clear vision is focussed on realising the potential of digital technologies to enable our young people to become engaged thinkers, active learners, knowledge constructors and global citizens to participate fully in society and the economy. In developing this Strategy, the Department adopted an evidence-based approach including extensive research and consultation with education stakeholders including young people.

As the current Digital Strategy for Schools expires at the end of the current school year (2020/2021), development of a new Digital Strategy is underway. An extensive consultation process has commenced with details available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/7d09a-digital-strategy-for-schools/> . All relevant research and reports will be reviewed as part of the process to develop the new strategy.

First Aid Training

333. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Education if she is considering making the provision of basic first-aid techniques mandatory across schools nationwide in view of recent events; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32668/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): There are no plans at present to introduce First Aid into the curriculum. The curriculum in second level schools must meet an extensive range of needs in catering for the cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social, physical and moral development of students, and in preparing them for the demands of citizenship, life-long learning and social and economic participation. Key messages arising from evaluations of the curriculum relate to overload, and the need to make more time and space for active learning and the acquisition of core skills.

The Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) curriculum, which is currently mandatory for Junior Cycle students, is focused on promoting the health and well-being of children. Teachers can include CPR/first-aid in their SPHE programme, however, it is not a mandatory component. Personal safety is currently addressed in a variety of ways in the primary and post primary curricula. For example, SPHE aims to develop student’s skills for keeping safe and to make students aware of appropriate responses to various threats to personal safety. This provides schools with opportunities to prioritise first aid if they consider this to meet the needs of their students.

At Junior Cycle, the curriculum is made up of a combination of full subjects and short courses. Short courses are designed for 100 hours of engagement over the three years of Junior Cycle. Some short courses will be designed centrally by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and others by schools themselves or other bodies, using the template

provided by the NCCA. It is therefore open to a school or other body to develop a short course in first aid training, for use in schools.

There are also opportunities within Transition Year in which a flexible menu of learning modules can be provided by schools within the context of a framework for the programme set out by the Department. As part of this, it is open to schools to provide first aid training if they wish to do so.

Schools are encouraged to engage with community groups and a wide range of stakeholders to provide for extra-curricular learning opportunities such as first-aid training or to give talks to students. It is the policy of this Department not to endorse any products or programmes produced by external parties for use in schools, irrespective of whether these are for commercial purposes or are freely available to schools. It is the responsibility of each individual school to select the materials and resources that it will use to support its implementation of the curriculum.

First Aid Training

334. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if it is planned to include CPR training on the curriculum at second level; if it is planned to take measures to increase the knowledge of CPR training; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32669/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): There are no plans at present to introduce First Aid into the curriculum. The curriculum in second level schools must meet an extensive range of needs in catering for the cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social, physical and moral development of students, and in preparing them for the demands of citizenship, life-long learning and social and economic participation. Key messages arising from evaluations of the curriculum relate to overload, and the need to make more time and space for active learning and the acquisition of core skills.

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There are also opportunities within Transition Year in which a flexible menu of learning modules can be provided by schools within the context of a framework for the programme set out by the Department. As part of this, it is open to schools to provide first aid training if they wish to do so.

Schools are encouraged to engage with community groups and a wide range of stakeholders to provide for extra-curricular learning opportunities such as first-aid training or to give talks

to students. It is the policy of this Department not to endorse any products or programmes produced by external parties for use in schools, irrespective of whether these are for commercial purposes or are freely available to schools. It is the responsibility of each individual school to select the materials and resources that it will use to support its implementation of the curriculum.

Climate Action Plan

335. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Education the current and capital costs involved with each action item in the Interim Climate Action Plan under her Department's responsibility. [32695/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The following actions are assigned to the Department of Education under the Interim Climate Action Plan.

Action No.	Sub Action	Action
22	22a	Establish an appropriately resourced Climate Action Unit in every Government Department to ensure Climate considerations are at the core of policy development
89	89a	Enhance communications on Climate Agenda in schools sector with a particular focus on pilot deep energy retrofit projects delivered under Pathfinder Programme in partnership with the SEAI
239	239a	Hold a public consultation on a National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development to 2030 to inform a new Strategy and Action Plan
240	240a	Implement an enhanced approach to energy performance and renewable energy capability in school buildings, Encouraging schools to have an "energy champion" within their distributed leadership team

To date there has been no current cost expenditure (beyond immediate staff costs) or capital cost expenditure incurred with each action item.

Departmental Schemes

336. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Education the breakdown of the cost per school for retrofits under the pathfinder scheme. [32704/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The School energy retrofit pathfinder programme is jointly funded from the Department of Education and Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications.

This Pathfinder is paving the way for, and informing, a much larger national schools programme for the energy retrofit of schools built prior to 2008 from 2023 onwards as included in the NDP. It is facilitating research on a range of typical retrofit options, which will have been tried and tested. It is providing valuable development information for a solution driven delivery strategy which will be founded on a good evidence base that has proven the robustness and scalability of renewable solutions within the schools sector.

Since 2017, 39 schools have seen over €22.9 million invested in energy efficiency retrofits with an average cost per school in the region of €600,000.

The pathfinder has focused in 2021 on renewable decarbonised heating solutions with associated works to achieve reduced heat losses for decarbonised solution compatibility, this includes six schools with a budget of €14 million.

School Patronage

337. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Education if her Department plans to survey Dungarvan and the wider west County Waterford area to ascertain demand for a non-denominational primary school in the area; if Dungarvan or west County Waterford have in the past been identified by her Department as potential areas for the development of a non-denominational primary school; if they are currently designated as such; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32709/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The patronage divesting process arises from the recommendations of the 2012 report of the Advisory Group to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, following which the Department undertook surveys of parental preferences in 43 areas of stable population in 2012 and 2013 to establish the level of parental demand for a wider choice in the patronage of primary schools within these areas. Analysis of the parental preferences expressed in each area surveyed indicated that there was sufficient parental demand to support changes in school patronage in 28 areas, including in Dungarvan.

Under the patronage divesting process, a school can be opened where a school building became, or was due to become available as a result of an amalgamation/closure of an existing school. In some areas, including in the case of Dungarvan, in responding to demand for diversity where existing patrons were unable make school properties available, my Department also included an examination of properties held in public ownership.

To date, it has not been possible to secure a school property to facilitate a new school being established in Dungarvan. However, the Department is continuing its efforts in relation to identifying a suitable solution under the patronage divesting process.

Departmental Policies

338. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education if she will outline her key policy achievements in her Department since 27 June 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32714/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Within the past year, the key objectives and achievements for my department included the safe reopening of schools and the continuity of the Leaving Certificate amid the adversity and disruptions of the pandemic.

A key objective of the Government’s plan for living with COVID-19 was that our children and school staff could attend school safely. On 27 July 2020 I published ‘Reopening Our Schools: The Roadmap for The Full Return to School’, supported by a funding package of €375 million with this funding being supplemented over the course of the academic year. The safe return to schools in September 2020 involved approximately 1 million students and 100,000 staff in 4,000 schools. This was supported by special arrangements for PPE, school transport, classroom layouts, curriculum guidance and additional staffing. In recognition of the fact that remote learning was particularly challenging for children with additional needs, a supplementary programme was put in place to support the education and/or care needs of pupils with complex needs.

Following a further period of school closure in early 2021, schools reopened on a phased basis in February/March, with a full reopening after the Easter break.

With regard to the Leaving Certificate, the provision of Calculated Grades for over 60,000 Leaving Certificate students in 2020 enabled them to progress to further and higher education and the world of work. For the 2021 Leaving Cert, following an intensive set of engagements

with stakeholders, arrangements in respect of the 2021 state exams were decided on by Government on 17 February, with both written examinations and accredited grades available to students. The written Leaving Certificate written exams successfully commenced on 9 June with the orals in language subjects and the practical components in other subjects having taken place earlier including during the traditional Easter Holidays. The choice provided to students as between accredited grades or examinations or a combination of both is a student centred approach which I was anxious to deliver on.

Other significant achievements in the period referred to by the Deputy include:

- Significant increased investment in education secured in Budget 2021. Budget 2021 continued the programme of major reinvestment in our primary and post-primary education system. Building on the initiatives set out in the Programme for Government, the budget for the Department of Education will be €8.9 billion in 2021, an increase of €410 million or some 5 five per cent on 2020 and creating 1,065 new teaching posts. This investment will see the primary staffing schedule reduced by one point, to a historically low level of 25:1.

- Expanded summer provision for pupils with complex special educational needs and those at greatest risk of educational disadvantage was delivered in Summer 2020 and, for 2021, I secured a doubling of the funding available to €40m so that the programmes could be further expanded.

- Development of a New Digital Strategy for Schools

- The launch of a new arts in education initiative – BLAST 2021

- Payment of €100 million in ICT grant funding for schools, inclusive of a special €10 million payment to support the purchase of technology and devices for disadvantaged students during the school closures period.

- Payment of €50 million under the Minor Works Scheme to primary and post-primary schools.

- A 6 week sampler module of languages in primary schools has been announced, with schools invited to express an interest in participating with funding to support the participation of at least 100 schools provided. It will include foreign languages and Irish Sign Language (ISL) and will run for 6 weeks towards the end of the first term of the 2021/22 school year. The module will be used to inform the development of a new primary curriculum for foreign languages over the coming years.

- Budget 2021 investment includes a capital allocation for new and more energy-efficient school buildings with a €740 million budget for 2021 under Project Ireland 2040.

- €160 million was provided to schools in Minor Works funding in 2020, including €30 million which was brought forward from 2021. Due to the unprecedented Covid-19 situation, exceptional Minor Works Grant funding was also provided to Post Primary schools.

Equality Issues

339. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education the way in which her Department and agencies under her remit are working towards enabling access to employment for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities, including, but not limited to, persons with disabilities, persons from ethnic minorities, Travellers, Mincéirí; and if she will make a

statement on the matter. [32736/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): In recruiting Civil Servants the Human Resources Unit of my Department engage the Public Appointment Service (PAS) which was established under the terms of the Public Services Management Act to provide recruitment, assessment and selection services for Civil and Public Service bodies.

Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005 provides that public bodies promote and support the employment of people with disabilities and ensure that 3% of staff employed are people with a disability. As at the 31st December 2020 the percentage of staff at my Department that declared a disability was 3.58%.

State Examinations

340. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education when the SEC will recommence the extensive review how to support students experiencing exceptional circumstances during their State examinations following on from the interim pilot measure in 2019 for students who suffered bereavement close to or over their examinations; when this review will be completed; and if the interim measures will continue to be offered while the review is taking place. [32785/21]

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

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

State Examinations

341. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to reports in the media that the leaving certificate orals were not up to standard this year; if candidates who seek an appeal will be provided with a full transcript of the oral interview or just a transcript of their own voice; and if the guidance from SEC to oral language interviewers was issued on 23 March 2021, three days prior to examinations commencing. [32787/21]

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

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

Social Welfare Schemes

342. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Social Protection if consideration is being given to providing a free travel pass to persons who lose their driver licence due to a diagnosis of epilepsy or breakthrough seizures. [32542/21]

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 approx. 999,000 customers with direct eligibility. The estimated expenditure on free travel in 2021 is €95 million.

In general, access to a free travel pass for those aged under 66 is linked to a person being in receipt of certain primary Social Protection payments such as Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension, Carer's Allowance, Blind Pension and Partial Capacity Benefit.

Extending the free travel scheme to people with epilepsy during the period in which they are disallowed from driving cannot be considered in isolation. There are a range of disabilities and medical conditions that can prevent a person from holding a driving licence and to award a free travel pass to any one of these conditions in isolation would immediately result in calls for all people who are not allowed to hold a driving licence because of their medical condition to receive the free travel pass and could result in challenges under the Equal Status Act.

If the Free Travel scheme were to be extended to all people who are not allowed to drive due to their disability, regardless of whether they receive a qualifying payment, a medical assessment process would be required for all such applications, significantly changing the nature of the scheme and requiring additional administrative processes to be put in place in order to adjudicate eligibility. Significant extra funding would also be required and accordingly, it could only be considered in the context of overall budgetary negotiations.

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

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

343. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Social Protection the position regarding the continuation of the pandemic unemployment benefit for the aviation sector; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32548/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is a statutory income support for qualifying employees and the self-employed who have lost employment due to Covid-19. As employments are continuing to reopen with the lifting of public health restrictions the number of people in receipt of the PUP are reducing with some 267,000 supported by the payment this week. This support is available to all workers impacted by the pandemic, including those in the aviation sector, and is not provided on a sectoral basis.

I have recently confirmed as part of the National Economic Recovery Plan that PUP is being extended beyond the end of June 2021. This extension is not sector-specific. 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 next September. People currently receiving the €203 rate and those who reach the €203 rate in each phase, will then transition to standard jobseeker terms over a period of time and with advance notice.

The Community Welfare Service remains available to provide support for any person who

is experiencing financial hardship under the means-tested supplementary welfare allowance scheme including an Exceptional or Urgent Needs payment.

I trust that this clarifies the position at this time.

Pension Provisions

344. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the current position on pension provision for community employment supervisors following the recent negotiations with the relevant unions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32658/21]

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

The programme is delivered through independent CE sponsoring authorities. The contract agreement between the Department and the CE sponsoring authorities establishes their role as independent contractors. CE sponsoring authorities are the legal employers of CE supervisors, CE assistant supervisors and CE participants.

The CE sponsoring authorities receive state funding to cover the salary costs of supervisors, assistant supervisors and participant remuneration, training and material costs from the Department. CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors are not public servants or employees of the Department or the state.

As the Deputy will be aware, CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors have been seeking for several years, through their union representatives, the allocation of Exchequer funding to implement a 2008 Labour Court recommendation relating to the provision of a pension scheme for CE supervisors and assistant supervisors who are employed by CE schemes.

The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform has to have regard to any potential Exchequer exposure associated with the specific issue relating solely to CE supervisors arising from the Labour Court recommendation. Any proposal to resolve this specific issue, can and will only apply to CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors.

Within this context, officials from my Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform held discussions on proposals to progress and resolve this issue over the past number of months, while having regard to the wider budgetary framework. Officials from my Department also held discussions with unions representing CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors.

As the Deputy is aware, an agreement was reached between my colleagues, the Minister for Social Protection and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform on proposals to resolve the long-standing issue. Details of these proposals have been forwarded to the unions representing CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors by my Department officials. I understand the unions have been considering these proposals and have sought clarification on some of the details contained therein. My Department officials are continuing to engage with the unions on this basis.

I am confident this is a solid basis for progressing and resolving this complex issue, while ensuring there is no potential exposure for additional costs to the exchequer.

Minister Humphreys and I will continue to support CE for the benefit of the CE participants and the valuable contribution being made to local communities.

Departmental Schemes

345. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons with disabilities currently availing of the training support grant that was introduced in 2020; and the breakdown of groups of disabled persons that are applying for the grant. [32535/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Training Support Grant (TSG), available through my Department, can be used for the purchase of training (where this cannot be provided by a state provider within a reasonable time) or for certain other expenditures such as purchase of tools or travel costs to job interviews. The TSG can be made available to jobseekers who have registered with the Employment Service and undertaken a guidance process leading to an agreed career plan, and who are in receipt of certain specified welfare payments, primarily jobseekers' and lone parent payments as well as payments related to disability and long-term illness.

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

346. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Social Protection the total amount of funding allocated for the training support grant; the courses or training opportunities for which the grant has been used; and her plans to increase the amount of the training support grant in Budget 2022. [32537/21]

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. The grant can be provided where an immediate skills gap is identified that represents an obstacle to taking up a job offer or accessing other opportunities. The grant can be used for training up to level 6 on the QQI or training such as safe pass, driving licences, HACCP or security industry permits as appropriate.

There is a provision of €11.3m for this support for 2021 to help with the training needs of up to 12,000 individuals. As part of the July Stimulus the funding available through this grant was doubled from €500 to €1,000. This ensures that greater funding is available for individual jobseekers to assist with their short term training costs.

Any further changes to the provision for this grant would have to be considered in a budgetary context. I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Departmental Expenditure

347. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the vote headings and sub-headings for her Department in tabular form. [32544/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Below in tabular format are the Vote headings and sub-headings for my Department. The listing covers the year 2020 and is currently subject to audit by the C&AG.

[[Table](https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-06-17_pq347-17-06-21_en.docx)]

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

348. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will allow taxi drivers aged 66 and over to receive for the pandemic unemployment payment as part of the support package announced for the small public service vehicle Industry on 9 June 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32600/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is a statutory scheme providing income support for those aged 18 to 66 years who lost employment due to consequences of the pandemic. The age condition for the scheme is aligned with that under the Jobseekers supports and there are no plans to amend this condition.

People aged 66 years and over are provided for within the Social Protection framework through the State Pension – either the contributory pension based on PRSI contributions, or the non-contributory means-tested pension.

Where an individual does not have the required number of contributions to receive the maximum rate of State Pension Contributory, they may qualify for an increased rate of State Pension Non-Contributory, depending on their circumstances.

People aged 66 and over may also be entitled to ancillary supports which include free travel, fuel allowance, household benefits package for gas or electricity costs and living alone allowance.

The Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme administered by the Community Welfare Service is also available to any person of any age who is experiencing financial hardship. Exceptional and Urgent Needs Payments may be made subject to satisfying the means test.

The income supports provided by my Department are not sector specific. On 9th June 2021 the Minister for Transport, Eamonn Ryan TD announced a new €6.5 million support package for the Small Public Service Vehicle Industry (SPSV).

I trust that this clarifies the position for you.

Social Welfare Schemes

349. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of an application for a carer's allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32602/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Carer's allowance (CA) is a means-tested social assistance payment made to a person who is habitually resident in the State and who is providing full-time care and attention to a child or an adult who has such a disability that as a result they require that level of care.

I can confirm that the person concerned was in receipt of CA in respect of her husband from 19 February 2015.

The Medical Control Section in the Department undertook a review of the CA claim of the person concerned and the requirement for full time care of the care recipient in October 2017. Following the receipt of the medical information from the care recipient, the Department's Medical Assessor (MA) found that the care recipient did not require full time care and attention and deemed the person concerned was not eligible for CA. A Natural Justice letter issued to the person concerned in August 2019.

The person concerned submitted further medical evidence to the Department in September 2019 and this was referred to the Department's MA. Having reviewed this additional information, the Department upheld their original decision that the person concerned was not eligible for CA.

Due to the COVID lockdown in March 2020, the Department did not issue any letters of termination until May 2021, when the person concerned was informed that their eligibility for CA would cease on the 26th June 2021. The customer subsequently contacted the Department to indicate that they would provide additional medical information for the care recipient. Once any additional information is provided, this will be considered and the Department will notify the person concerned of the outcome of the review of her claim.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Departmental Expenditure

350. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the amount her Department and associated agencies have spent on social media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32620/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department administers over 90 separate schemes and services, which affect the lives of almost every person in the State. The Department is committed to ensuring that members of the public are fully aware of the welfare supports and services that are available to them and public information campaigns are an important part of this work.

During the period 01 January 2021 to 12 June 2021, the Department delivered a total of 5 public information campaigns in 2021. Advertising was carried across a range of media, including social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter), as well as national and regional print and radio, and targeted digital advertising. The aim of the campaigns was to increase public awareness of the available income supports and the Department's relevant schemes and services.

All public information campaigns are developed and targeted carefully in using the best mix of media formats to ensure that the Department's messages reach members of the public effectively, while ensuring value for money.

The cost of social media advertising from 01 January 2021 until 12 June 2021 is outlined

below in tabular form. Please note that these figures exclude VAT, ASAI, and agency fees.

Social Media Advertising Expenditure (01 January 2021 to 12 June 2021)

Department	Costs (€)
Department of Social Protection (DSP)	€38,399.51*
Agencies	Costs (€)
Pensions Council	Nil
Pensions Authority	Nil
Labour Market Advisory Council (LMAC)	Nil
Citizens Information Board (CIB)	€5,054.00
Abhaile Service	€6,063.05

* Invoiced to 12 June 2021. The figure excludes a spend of €6,700 on social media advertising for the Pensions Commission Consultation which was paid for by the Commission but facilitated by DSP.

Departmental Expenditure

351. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the amount her Department has spent on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32637/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department administers over 90 separate schemes and services, which affect the lives of almost every person in the State. The Department is committed to ensuring that members of the public are fully aware of the welfare supports and services that are available to them, especially during the ongoing pandemic, and public information campaigns are an important part of this work.

During the period, 01 January to 12 June 2021, the Department of Social Protection delivered 5 public information campaigns across a range of media including national and regional print publications, national and regional radio, and digital and social media advertising. These campaigns were designed to increase public awareness of the available income supports, schemes and services, and to provide opportunities for greater public engagement and input into important public consultations.

The total cost associated with the production of social media content from 01 January 2021 until 12 June 2021 is €4,616* excluding VAT.

*Invoiced to 12 June 2021. This figure excludes spend on social media content production for the Pensions Commission Consultation at a cost of €560 ex VAT, which has been paid for by the Pensions Commission.

Departmental Expenditure

352. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the amount her Department and all associated agencies have spent on public relations consultancy costs since January 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32654/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): There has been no expenditure on public relations consultancy by the Department of Social Protection, or by any of the

agencies under its aegis, since January 2021.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Pensions Reform

353. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection further to Parliamentary Question No. 423 of 5 May 2021, the action that has been taken to ensure that those receiving pension payments overseas are no longer subject to bank charges in recognition of the reduction these charges cause to pension payments as a result of recent charges which were not in place before; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32677/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department, in conjunction with all Government Departments and Offices, moved its banking operations to Danske Bank on foot of a Government Decision to tender for an “All of Government” Banking Service. This migration of the Department’s banking services to the new provider, Danske Bank, was completed last month.

One of the last banking migration phases was the moving of foreign EFT payments, which was carried out in March 2021. These payments are to beneficiaries who are resident in 21 countries outside of both the Single European Payments Area (SEPA) and the United Kingdom. While the migration of these foreign payments to Danske Bank was successful, beneficiaries in the United States and Canada were levied with cross border payment charges by their own banks.

While the Department of Social Protection has no control over the fees charged by foreign banks to their own customers, the Department has been in continuous liaison with Danske Bank to try and reduce or eliminate the fees which U.S. and Canadian banks might charge their own customers. The Department has also implemented a number of payment process changes to Social Welfare pension payments to help in this regard.

EFT payments to markets outside Ireland where the sending bank is not a member of the domestic clearing system, such as the US or Canada, are processed as international cross border payments, also known as ‘international wire transfers’. Processing such payments as international wire transfers ensures that the sending bank complies with its national and international Anti Money Laundering (AML) and Counter Terrorist Financing (CTF) obligations. In order to effect these international wire transfers in markets such as the US and Canada, the services of correspondent banks are necessary, and their use is the industry standard approach. Correspondent banks will deduct charges from the payment amount to compensate for the cost of processing the payment and discharging their AML and CTF obligations.

As previously outlined in Parliamentary Question No. 423 of 5 May 2021, Danske Bank secured a significant reduction in the processing charge levied by its American correspondent bank on the Department’s payments to pensioners resident in the United States. In addition, the Department amended its Social Welfare payment files to ensure that all pension payments to beneficiaries outside the SEPA zone and the UK are clearly marked as pension payments. This change was in place for all payments to North America in April.

Many bank customers in both Canada and the United States can avail of reduced bank fees on pension payments, depending on the financial institution that they bank with and the type of account they hold. The Department is aware of a number of pensioners in both the United States and Canada who no longer incur any charges due to these payment processing changes, in particular the explicit marking of the Department’s payments as pension payments.

For pension payments to Canada, the Department of Social Protection has implemented a number of changes to its payment file processing to enable Danske Bank to direct payments to additional correspondent banks. These changes have ensured that payments to most pensioners in Canada should only incur one set of cross border fees. With these process changes the number of correspondent banks that can handle Social Welfare payments has changed from one in March, to four in April and six in June.

Further changes are currently being implemented which should eliminate duplicate cross border fees for the remaining pensioners who do not have an account in one of these six Canadian correspondent banks. It is hoped that this change will be in place for pension payments issued in July 2021.

The Department of Social Protection continues to liaise with Danske Bank in relation to this issue.

Departmental Policies

354. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will outline her key policy achievements in her Department since 27 June 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32724/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Throughout the period referred to, the country continued to be severely affected by the effects of the pandemic and unprecedented numbers of people suffered job losses and temporary lay-offs as a result of public health restrictions. Throughout this time, thanks to the monumental efforts of the staff of my Department, we have continued to provide vital income supports, through the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and the enhanced Illness Benefit scheme - alongside all of the existing suite of social protection schemes for our pensioners, people with disabilities, carers, one-parent families amongst others – to all of our citizens. Research undertaken by the ESRI on the impact on family incomes of Covid-19 related job losses found that 400,000 families would have seen their disposable income fall by more than 20 per cent in the absence of policy measures such as the PUP and the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS). The ESRI also found that the PUP and TWSS measures were particularly effective in cushioning families at the lower-end of income distribution from losses.

As a further step towards supporting those in greatest need, we provided for a the payment of a Christmas Bonus to over 1.6 million recipients in December with payments totalling €390 million. On an exceptional basis, the 2020 Christmas Bonus was also paid to some 311,000 recipients of the PUP who had also been in receipt of a PUP payment - continuously or otherwise - for at least 4 months (17 weeks) since March 2020, at an additional cost of over €93 million.

Notwithstanding the enormous strain on the national finances caused by the pandemic, I was pleased to be able to secure funding in Budget 2021 for a number of targeted increases aimed at particularly vulnerable cohorts of the population. These included increases to the living alone allowance, fuel allowance, qualified child increases, an increase in the offshore island allowance, an increase to the disability allowance earnings threshold, a €150 increase in the carers support grant and the removal of the one parent family payment earnings threshold.

I was also pleased to secure funding of an additional €5.5 million to provide for a major expansion of the Hot School Meals Pilot Programme. This will extend the provision of hot school meals to an additional 35,000 primary school children, currently receiving the cold lunch option.

As part of the wider Government Covid-19 emergency response, we introduced a simplified application for rent supplement. I was particularly pleased that we were able to establish a protocol with Tusla which ensures that victims of domestic violence are now able to access rent supplement as seamlessly and as quickly as possible.

I was equally glad to be in a position to provide additional supports to families by ensuring that the Department was in a position to pay for the additional three weeks of Parent's Benefit when the necessary legislation was introduced earlier this year.

In fulfilment of a commitment under the Programme for Government, I was glad to be able to introduce a benefit payment for people aged between 65 and 66 years who are no longer engaged in employment or self-employment. A person in receipt of this payment is not required to be available for full-time work or to be genuinely seeking work and they are not required to sign on the Live Register.

Again in fulfilment of a Programme for Government commitment, I established the Pensions Commission which is examining sustainability and eligibility issues in respect of State Pension arrangements and which will outline options for the Government to address issues such as qualifying age, contribution rates, total contributions and eligibility requirements.

Also in the pensions area, I was very pleased to be able to formally sign regulations to introduce the IORP II directive, a very substantial directive which supports positive reform of the Irish occupational pension sector.

As part of the July Jobs Stimulus Package, the Government announced 3,000 additional places on Employment Support Schemes, including Community Employment and Tús. These additional places will provide valuable opportunities for long term unemployed persons and will support CE and Tús schemes in providing services to local communities in rural and urban communities.

My Department is currently finalising a new Pathways to Work Strategy which I expect to publish in the coming weeks and which will focus on the next stage of our response to the pandemic and on supporting people to get back to work.

These are some of the key achievements which my Department, through the enormous efforts of all of its staff, was able to deliver over the past year.

Pension Provisions

355. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider extending the back-payment period for late pension claims beyond the six-month limit for extenuating circumstances; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32732/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Social welfare legislation provides for backdating of State pension (contributory) for 6 months from the date of receipt of the claim. Backdating of a late claim beyond 6 months may be considered in circumstances where the failure to claim arose as a result of -

1) incorrect information being supplied by the Department or 2) the claimant's incapacity by illness or infirmity to make a claim or have someone make a claim on their behalf.

The governing social welfare legislation is contained in section 241 of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act, 2005 (as amended) and Article 186 of Social Welfare (Consolidated Claims,

Payments and Control) Regulations 2007, also referred to as Statutory Instrument 142 of 2007.

It should be noted that this legislates for all payments by my Department and, as such, any changes would have far reaching consequences. Accordingly, there are currently no plans to amend the time allowed for backdating claims.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Equality Issues

356. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Social Protection the way in which her Department and agencies under her remit are working towards enabling access to employment for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities, including, but not limited to, persons with disabilities, persons from ethnic minorities, Travellers, Mincéirí; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32746/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Research consistently shows the importance of decent employment in supporting positive outcomes for the individual and for society. I am keenly aware of the role of employment in developing personal capabilities and potential, deepening social connections and enabling full participation and inclusion in society. My Department is committed to assisting all individuals in society to prepare for and secure employment. I also understand that the path to employment is not the same for everyone and that additional help is required for those facing disadvantage and those in minority communities.

The key avenue for my Department to enable access to employment for all unemployed persons is through the Public Employment Service, Intreo. The Intreo service is available to all and supports jobseekers with employment assistance and advice to progress persons into employment, including addressing skills deficits. This engagement, along with the suite of labour market activation policies, is designed to assist jobseekers to prepare for, secure and sustain employment.

Given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on our society and economy, Government is taking steps to enhance the capacity of the Public Employment Service and the supports available to the unemployed. This will be delivered through the forthcoming Pathways to Work 2021-2025 strategy. Key insights to this strategy, which I hope to launch in the coming weeks, were included in the Economic Recovery Plan published earlier this month.

While this Pathways to Work strategy will include measures to address the challenges arising as a result of the pandemic, the strategy will also focus on those groups unemployed and most distant from the labour market pre-pandemic. The Economic Recovery Plan introduced some of the key measures which will focus assistance on disadvantaged groups, including:

- Expanding the delivery of employment services to Lone Parents;
- Introducing an Early Engagement model for jobseekers with disabilities,
- Promoting wider take-up of incentives and supports available for the employment of people with disabilities;
- Reserving places on employment services and training programmes for people from minority backgrounds of disadvantage;
- Consulting with stakeholders from the Traveller (and/or Roma) community to advise the

PES in developing tailored support programmes.

This work, under both Pathways to Work and the Economic Recovery Plan, seeks to not only return our economy and society to the pre-pandemic position, but to foster a more balanced, sustainable and inclusive recovery. This includes building a more inclusive labour market, with a greater focus on participation and reducing barriers to participation and/or employment.

In addition to those supports provided by Intreo, my Department works closely with the Further Education and Training sector in the provision of activation supports, including opportunities for training, upskilling and reskilling. The Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025, launched by my Colleague Minister Harris earlier this year, includes a bursary support scheme to be established for participants from disadvantaged groups, including lone parents, people with disabilities, Travellers and Roma. The strategy also commits to an equity of access stakeholder subcommittee to ensure that programme designs reflect the needs of underrepresented groups.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Schemes

357. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will define what is considered a good reason for not making a social welfare claim within the time limit; if she will consider not knowing about eligibility for the payment to be a good reason for women not in control of their household's finances; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32756/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The primary legislation governing the manner and time limits within which claims for social welfare payments should be made is set out in Section 241 of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005, as amended, and associated regulations. The legislation requires that persons must claim their entitlements within a specific period from the date their entitlement arises. This is referred to as the 'prescribed time'. The prescribed time for making a claim differs depending on the relevant scheme and once a claim is made within the prescribed time for that particular payment, it is automatically backdated to the date of entitlement.

Where a claim is made after the prescribed time, a statutory disqualification or disallowance is incurred for any period falling outside the relevant time limits. However, the legislation gives deciding officers and designated persons some discretion to consider backdating a claim entitlement date subject to prescribed limits. Regulations allow for circumstances where the claimant establishes to the satisfaction of a deciding officer or designated person that there was 'good cause' for any delay in making a claim, that they were inadvertently misinformed by an officer of the Department or incapacitated and unable to make the claim on time.

Each late claim is assessed by deciding officers on a case by case basis taking into account the contentions and evidence put forward by the applicant to explain the cause of the delay. The deciding officer may decide to backdate the payment, for a maximum period of up to 6 months in respect of most schemes, depending on the circumstances. Backdating of a late claim beyond 6 months can be considered only in two specific circumstances whereby the failure to claim arose as the result of either incorrect information being supplied by the Department or the claimant's incapacity due to illness or infirmity.

The existing legislation allows a Deciding Officer the discretion to back date payment where he/she is satisfied that the claimant had 'good cause' for failing to apply within the prescribed

time, provided of course that the claimant was eligible during the 6 months.

‘Good cause’ is not defined in the legislation, and is assessed by deciding officers by the application of common sense principles to the contentions put forward by the person concerned and by the evaluation of the evidence available to support those contentions.

Lack of knowledge is not regarded as a sufficient reason for not claiming in time. The Department publishes information regarding its schemes, including the time limits for making a claim, as widely as possible in a range of formats, and advertises changes of legislation in the National Press. Information Offices are also available throughout the country for people to make enquiries as to their entitlements.

All statutory decisions with regard to entitlement under these provisions, made by deciding officers and designated persons, can be appealed to the Social Welfare Appeals Office.

The Department has published information and operational guidelines on Claims and Late Claims on gov.ie.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

358. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will provide a payment for parents who have to take unpaid leave to mind their children that have to isolate due to having or being a close contact with Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32755/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): There are a range of family leave options available to working parents, many of which have been extended in the recent past.

The Parental Leave Act 1998 entitles parents to unpaid leave to look after their children. This leave is available to a relevant parent, who is defined as a parent, adoptive parent or person acting in loco parentis.

The Parental Leave (Amendment) Act 2019 introduced a significant extension to the existing parental leave entitlements, raising the age of the child for whom parental leave may be taken from eight years to twelve. It also extended the parental leave entitlement by 8 weeks, on a phased basis. The last of these increases came into effect on 1 September 2020 and parents are now entitled to 26 weeks leave in total.

In addition, the Parent’s Leave and Benefit Act 2019 introduced two weeks of paid parent’s leave for each relevant parent, as defined in the legislation, to be taken in the first year after the birth or adoptive placement of a child. The definition of relevant parent under the Act includes a parent of the child and the spouse, civil partner or cohabitant of a parent of the child.

Following the commencement of the Family Leave and Miscellaneous Provisions Act 2021 on 1 April 2021, an additional three weeks of paid parent’s leave has been granted to each relevant parent, and the period in which the leave can be taken has been extended to the first two years after the birth or adoptive placement of a child.

Section 6 of the Carer’s Leave Act 2001 provides that employees with at least one year’s continuous service are entitled to take up to 104 weeks of carer’s leave to enable them to provide full-time care and attention to a person who is in need of such care.

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Carer's Leave is unpaid but an employee may also qualify for Carer's Benefit or Carer's Allowance, the payment of which is a matter for the Minister for Social Protection.

There are no plans to amend any of the family leave provisions at present.

Matters in relation to a payment of benefit are under the remit of the Minister for Social Protection.

Departmental Expenditure

359. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the amount his Department and associated agencies have spent on social media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32608/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): My Department spent €28,900 on social media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021.

I have asked agencies under my Department's remit to respond directly to the Deputy in respect of spend on social media.

Departmental Expenditure

360. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the amount his Department has spent on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32625/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): My Department has spent €5744 on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021.

Departmental Expenditure

361. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the amount his Department and all associated agencies have spent on public relations consultancy costs since January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32642/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The Department for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has had no expenditure on public relations consultancy in 2021.

I have requested agencies under my Department's remit to respond directly to the Deputy.

Climate Action Plan

362. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the current and capital costs involved with each action item in the Interim Cli-

mate Action Plan under his Department's responsibility. [32694/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): Action 228a of the Interim Climate action Plan requires the Department of Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth to establish a Youth Climate Council as part of the new National Dialogue on Climate Action (NDCA) engagement model and annual Climate Action Plan consultations, to help support future dialogue with young people.

Steps are being taken to establish the Youth Climate assembly in partnership with relevant policy departments. Capital costs are not anticipated and current costs associated with hosting the Youth Assembly will depend on whether the assembly meets online or in person, which cannot be determined at the moment.

DCEDIY has completed the Youth Strand of the 2021 National Dialogue on Climate Action. Members of the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive assisted in the design of broad online climate conversations open to all citizens (over 16 years of age), to ensure its relevance and accessibility to young people. DCEDIY ensured that all Comhairle na nÓg members, over 16 years of age, were actively encouraged to take part in this National Dialogue on Climate Action (NDCA). DCEDIY designed and facilitated climate conversations specifically for young people and hosted in-depth local and national youth climate conversations to input into the National Dialogue.

The voice of young people is included in the NDCA by:

Broad Online Conversation: Young people over 16 years of age participated in the Broad Online Conversation for individuals over 16 years of age and groups. DCEDIY ensured the inclusion of young people by facilitating consultations with the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive on the design of the online survey to make it accessible for young people. The online portal is based on 5 key climate relevant pillars, with questions to capture current thinking, an online quiz to capture people's willingness to change behaviour and supporting content to engage citizens on proposed future approaches. All Comhairle na nÓg across the country were invited and encouraged to participate in this on-line process; information was also issued to the recipient organisations of the DCEDIY Youth Climate Justice Fund encouraging their participation in this on-line element.

Local level conversations via Comhairle na nÓg networks: Young people were asked to contribute via the Comhairle na nÓg network with their observations and suggestions for local action. Following a selection process, 12 Comhairle na nÓg hosted in-depth locally focused conversations. The design of these local level climate conversations was developed with the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive. The Youth Climate Conversations at local level provided an opportunity for members of Comhairle na nÓg to meet up online for a structured conversation about their hopes and concerns, ideas for climate action in their local area, and how to support deeper youth engagement in climate issues. Their feedback will be integrated into the summary 'climate conversations' report.

In depth Citizen Conversations (80-90 citizens): A two week online community for participants was set up to host a series of focus groups on different topics. As part of this on-line citizen community, there was a youth strand of 20 young citizens. DCEDIY assisted in the selection of young participants from Comhairle na nÓg nominees, Youth Climate Justice Fund recipients and a representative from the Irish Second-Level Students Union.

Domestic Violence

363. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when he will publish the outcomes of the consultations by his Department which concluded on 9 April 2021 on the operation of a paid leave scheme for victims of domestic violence. [32708/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Since its formation, this Government has made clear that tackling domestic, sexual and gender-based violence is a key priority. The Programme for Government contains a commitment to investigate the provision of paid leave and social protection provision to victims of domestic violence with a view to establishing a statutory entitlement to paid domestic violence leave.

As the Deputy is aware, the issue of domestic violence leave is currently being studied by officials in my Department, including the examination of domestic violence leave at international level, the identification of best practice and the development of a suitable model for rollout in Ireland.

My Department has also engaged in a targeted consultation process with relevant stakeholders and social partners to examine how a scheme of paid leave should operate to address the needs of victims most effectively, including with the monitoring committee of the Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence, employers’ groups and trade unions and with stakeholders of the national Equality Strategy Committees falling under my Department’s remit.

A report is being prepared based on this work which will be brought to Government in the coming weeks. The report will include recommendations on how best to support employees experiencing domestic abuse, including the provision of a form of leave.

Departmental Policies

364. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will outline his key policy achievements in his Department since 27 June 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32712/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): My Department is currently collating the information requested and a reply will issue directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Equality Issues

365. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit are working towards enabling access to employment for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities, including, but not limited to, persons with disabilities, persons from ethnic minorities, Travellers, Mincéirí; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32734/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): My Department supports a range of initiatives that work towards enabling access to employment from persons from minority groups. The Migrant Integration Strategy is a whole-of-Government Strategy to support the integration of migrants. The Strategy includes a range of actions to support employment and pathways to work for migrants. The Strategy has

been extended until the end of 2021 to reflect the impact of COVID-19 on implementation.

Under the 2016 European Social Fund (“ESF”) Programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (“PEIL”) Integration and Employment of Migrants (“IEM”) programme. Five projects were approved for funding of €3.3m over 4 years. These projects are completing in 2021. This programme is funded 50% by EU, and 50% by the Government of Ireland.

There is currently a Call for Proposals open for projects to provide employment supports for persons within the International Protection System, in the amount of €250,000.

The Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) operates a Programme of resettlement across different counties throughout the country. Integral to the Programme is the employment of both Resettlement Workers (RSWs) and Inter-cultural workers (ICWs) who assist the refugees in their transition to independent community living.

The ICWs in particular encourage all refugees to partake in education with a specific focus on English language training. In addition, they seek to identify any skills, trades or past educational experience that refugees may possess with a view to matching them with potential employers or indeed further training or educational providers.

Others refugees with pre-existing trade skills have completed trade-focussed upskilling to allow them seek work in Ireland, for example Safepass and Forklift training. Others are facilitated in accessing Community Employment Schemes, again with a view to building on existing skill-sets in the hope of accessing full-time employment at a later stage.

Beyond that, in other instances RSWs have leveraged local contacts on the ground to provide people with the opportunity to obtain part-time work, again with a view to building up skill-sets and experience with the ultimate goal being to access full-time employment into the future.

The Anti-Racism Committee are in the middle of their Public Consultation (21 April to 14 July 2021) towards developing a National Action Plan Against Racism. Access to employment is one of the key themes of the Consultation.

The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) 2017 – 2021 represents a whole of Government approach to bring about meaningful change and progress for the Traveller and Roma communities in Ireland. The Strategy includes a range of actions to support employment and pathways to work for Travellers and Roma

My Department provides funding to the Special Initiative for Travellers (SITS) which is an initiative focussing on 7 locations nationwide with a view to coaching and assisting Travellers wishing to enter employment.

In relation to persons with disabilities, my Department is responsible for co-ordinating the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities 2015-2024 (CES). The CES is the primary disability employment policy initiative in Ireland. It is a cross-government approach, bringing together actions by Government Departments and Agencies to address the barriers and challenges to employment of persons with disabilities. The CES’s strategic priorities are to build skills, capacity and independence, to provide bridges and supports into work, to make work pay, to promote job retention and re-entry to work, to provide coordinated and seamless supports and to engage employers.

The public sector provides crucial opportunities for people with disabilities to access employment. The Government has committed to doubling the target for employment of people with disabilities in the public service from 3% to 6%. This is a commitment contained in the

CES. This will be done by means of the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) (Amendment) Bill. The General Scheme of that Bill will come to Government for approval this month.

Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005 sets out the legal obligations of public service bodies:-

- To promote and support the employment of people with disabilities
- To meet a target of 3% of employees with disabilities
- To report every year on achievement of these obligations

The National Disability Authority (NDA) has a statutory role in monitoring employment of persons with disabilities in the public sector. In their latest Report “2018 Report on Compliance with Part 5 of the Disability Act on the Employment of People with Disabilities in the Public Sector” the NDA reported that the then Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the agencies under the remit of the Department had all exceeded the 3% employment target for people with disabilities.

The Disability Liaison Officer of my Department works closely with the Public Appointments Service, who recruit for general civil grades for my Department and with staff who identify the need for an accommodation to ensure that they are supported in entering and remaining in the workplace.

My Department also participates in the Willing, Able and Mentoring Programme which is run by AHEAD and provides 6 month placements for graduates with disabilities.

My Department is willing to participate in any civil service scheme to enable access to employment for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities.

Student Accommodation

366. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention been drawn to the steep increase in on-campus student accommodation costs in UCD; if he has had any engagement with UCD or the university’s student union on this matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32786/21]

376. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps he is taking to prohibit universities charging up to €14,000 for on-campus student accommodation; the engagement he has had with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage in the context of rent cap legislation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32660/21]

381. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to the steep increase in on-campus student accommodation costs in UCD; his views on whether this will be a barrier for those that wish to study in the university; if he has had engagement with UCD or the university’s student union; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32784/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 366, 376 and 381 together.

Legislation was brought in in 2019 to ensure that students would have the same affordability measures as tenants within Rent Pressure Zones. I am aware of the increases in UCD accommodation fees for the 2021 academic year and I am disappointed that UCD has sought to increase

prices for students during the midst of a public health and an economic crisis.

Affordability must be a key pillar in the student accommodation sector and Department has been working with the Department of Housing, Heritage and Local Government on measures to ensure greater affordability of student accommodation. Legislation is being progressed which will restrict the up-front payments required to secure accommodation, including student accommodation, to no more than the equivalent of two months' rent, and limit payments thereafter to on month's rent at a time. Affordability of student accommodation will be discussed with stakeholders in the sector at the next meeting of the Working Group on Student Accommodation. My Department has sought information from UCD, provided through the Irish Universities Association (IUA) and will continue to engage with them.

Covid-19 Pandemic

367. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans for on-campus learning for third-level students for the upcoming academic year; if this will be a matter for each individual college or university; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32526/21]

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 reviewed 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.

Third Level Admissions

368. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps he is taking to obtain additional college places for the 2021-2022 academic year given the rise in CAO applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32549/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I am aware of the high number of CAO applications this year, and officials from my Department are engaging regularly with representatives from the higher education sector in relation to the 2021/22 academic year and demand for places.

€18 million has been provided in Budget 2021 which will build additional capacity in the system and address demographic growth pressures. This is in addition to additional places commencing in 2021, funded through the Human Capital Initiative Pillar 2, which will be on undergraduate courses in areas of identified skills needs.

The CAO process applications for undergraduate courses on behalf of the Higher Education Institutions. Decisions on admissions are made by the HEIs who then instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates. As such, neither I nor my Department have a role in the operation of the CAO.

However, my Department is monitoring the situation as it develops and my officials are working with the HEA and the Higher Education Institutions to identify where there is scope for additional places to be provided. In addition to higher education, I would like to highlight the range of options available in further education and training and apprenticeships. These options can serve both as an alternate pathway to a chosen career or an alternate pathway into higher education. For students who are not successful in gaining an offer for their course of choice in the first instance, there are alternate routes available to them to reach their preferred option.

All bodies involved will continue to work to ensure the availability of a full range of further and higher education options for applicants in 2021 and in future years.

Third Level Staff

369. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to bring into line retirement ages for employees of third-level universities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32559/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Universities are autonomous institutions within the meaning of the Universities Act 1997 and have autonomy in relation to human resource policies, subject to compli-

ance with Government policy in respect of employment numbers and pay policy, and are not under the direct control of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

With regards to the retirement age of Higher Education employees, the Public Service Superannuation (Age of Retirement) Act 2018 was enacted on 26 December 2018 and came into effect immediately from that date. The Act provides for an increase in the compulsory retirement age of most standard public servants recruited prior to 1 April 2004 to age 70. Universities are obliged to comply with employment legislation, including pension related legislation.

Language Schools

370. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will report on the return of English language schools in view of the reopening of international travel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32567/21]

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.

Third Level Fees

371. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to the fact that Irish students are being charged additional fees for the Scottish graduate-entry medicine programme based in the University of St. Andrews and the University of Dundee which contradicts the memorandum of understanding on the common travel area; the steps he will take to address the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32583/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Officials of my Department have been in touch with their counterparts in Scotland, who have confirmed that programme fees for the Graduate Entry Programme in Medicine is the same for Irish and the UK students (other than those from Scotland). However, I do understand that UK students are entitled to a bursary from the National Health Service, which amounts to £3,715, and this may account for the difference.

This approach is consistent with the Memorandum of Understanding on the Common Travel Area.

Third Level Admissions

372. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the details of the supports and grants and so on that are available for qualifying students from this jurisdiction accepted to study for primary teaching through Irish at a school (details supplied); the details of the qualifying conditions that apply; the level of grant aid available; and if other relevant information will be provided. [32593/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The main support available to assist students with the cost of higher education is the Student Grant Scheme. Students attending approved undergraduate courses in Northern Ireland can apply for a maintenance grant provided they meet the terms and conditions of the Student Grant Scheme.

There is also a special derogation contained within the Student Support Act 2011 which provides supports for postgraduate students attending courses in Northern Ireland. Such students may be eligible for assistance towards their postgraduate fees up to the maximum fees limit of €6,270 or a Postgraduate Fee Contribution of €3,500. The income threshold for eligibility for these grants has increased from €31,500 to €54,240. There is no other provision under the student grant scheme for the payment of fees to students studying outside of the State.

Students attending college in the academic year 2021/22 are required to submit their grant application to SUSI via www.susi.ie when the online application system opens for 2021/22 to have their eligibility for grant assistance assessed.

Tax relief at the standard rate of tax may be claimed in respect of tuition fees paid for approved courses at approved colleges of higher education including approved undergraduate and postgraduate courses in EU Member States and in non-EU countries. Further information on this tax relief is available from the Revenue Commissioners on www.revenue.ie.

Departmental Expenditure

373. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the amount his Department and associated agencies have spent on so-

cial media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32615/21]

374. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the amount his Department has spent on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32632/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 373 and 374 together.

My department has spent €39,385.62 on social media advertising and €19,236.70 on social media content creation in the timeframe outlined. My department does not hold records on social media advertising spend by agencies.

Question No. 374 answered with Question No. 373.

Departmental Expenditure

375. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the amount his Department and all associated agencies have spent on public relations consultancy costs since January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32649/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): My department has not incurred any costs on public relations consultancy since January 2021.

Question No. 376 answered with Question No. 366.

Third Level Examinations

377. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to the difficulties which will be caused for students who sit the HPAT exams if the results are not released before the CAO course change option is closed; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that HEAR and DARE eligible students will be particularly affected; if he can report on the date for release of the HPAT results; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32675/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The HPAT is independently administered by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) on behalf of the universities' medical schools and the RCSI. The CAO process applications for undergraduate, and some postgraduate, courses on behalf of the Universities, Technological Universities and Institutes of Technology, in line with their institutional autonomy in relation to admissions. Neither I nor my Department has a function in the administration of the HPAT or the CAO and it is not within my remit to determine either the release date for the HPAT results, or the close date for the CAO's change of mind facility.

It is my understanding that the HPAT results are to be released in late June, and that the CAO's change of mind facility will close on 1st July at 5pm. Therefore there should be, at a minimum, one day between the release of HPAT results and the closure of the change of mind facility.

Climate Action Plan

378. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the current and capital costs involved with each action item in the Interim Climate Action Plan under his Department's responsibility. [32698/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has a number of actions under the Interim Climate Action Plan.

Action 14: Strengthen our delivery of public funding for basic and applied research to underpin government policy, meet our decarbonisation objectives and open up new economic opportunities

- My Department has recently launched its consultation on the next National Research & Innovation Strategy and the areas of climate research and grand challenges are explicitly considered. No specific or discrete current and capital expenditure is currently allocated. An allocation for a new National Grand Challenges Programme is expected under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan.

- SFI currently operates a challenge based funding programme, the SFI Future Innovator Prize Programme. It is expected that announcements will be made in the coming weeks which will reflect allocation of funding to address challenges, including those related to climate, under this programme.

- SFI recently launched a new SFI Infrastructure Programme Call. The SFI Research Infrastructure Programme supports the research community in building and sustaining the required infrastructural capacity to accomplish high-quality, high-impact and innovative research in areas of science, technology, engineering and mathematics that demonstrably enhance and support enterprise competitiveness and societal development in Ireland. This particular call is being run in partnership with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) and will see co-funding of infrastructure (subject to international peer review) aligned to the research topics of particular relevant to SEAI which include wind energy, smart buildings, smart grids, transport, energy efficiency and more.

Action 50: Skill-up current contractors/other industry players in deep retrofit, NZEB and new technology installations

- The EU Upskilling Pathways Recommendation and the Skills to Advance programme are funded through the overall further education and training budget, and any provision specifically in relation to climate action elements would be within this overall allocation. Skills to Advance is funded through the National Training Fund (NTF) and there is an overall allocation of €23.3m in 2021 for this provision. Funding from the NTF is provided for through the annual Estimates process.

- In 2020 €500,000 was allocated within the July Jobs Stimulus to support development work to provide for the expansion of the National Retrofitting Programme. This funding was targeted to the development and rollout of NZEB programme development for reskilling of workers in anticipation of a significant expansion of provision in 2021. For 2021 €8m was allocated to supporting retrofit specific skills. This will provide up to 500 places on new specialist retrofitting training courses targeted towards unemployed persons, comprising a 10/12 week reskilling programme for unemployed persons to include training allowances in lieu of welfare payments.

Action 67: Set a trajectory for commencing and implementing a deep energy retrofit programme for the higher and further education sectors

- Undertake an updated space survey of the higher education sector, to fully ascertain the baseline with regard to energy efficiency and inform future capital investment

- Cost: Supports from external specialists at key points has cost the HEA in the region of €38,100 (exc. VAT) to date. The HEA are also seeking to develop a platform to manage and utilise the space survey data. The work done to date in this area has cost in the region of €29,600 (exc. VAT).

- Map the technical and administrative capacity required to design, deliver and oversee a deep energy retrofit programme for the higher and further education sectors

- Cost– this is cost neutral

- Progress implementation of the Energy Efficiency and Decarbonisation Pathfinder Programme, including lessons learned, and assess potential for new projects

- Cost– The cost associated with the DFHERIS and SEAI co-funded Energy Efficiency and Decarbonisation Pathfinder Programme to date is €18m. This includes €6m which was committed to the first phase of the programme which identified 8 pilot projects across the higher education sector. A further €12m was recently announced for a second Pathfinder programme call with a view to project delivery in 2022.

Action 170: Support, through the education system, the required initiatives in the Just Transition through existing and new strategies being developed, and through ongoing collaboration with relevant Government Departments and Agencies

- HCI: 11 courses, 223 places cost €1.4m

- Springboard+: 14 courses, 310 places, cost €1.12m

Departmental Policies

379. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will outline his key policy achievements in his Department since 27 June 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32719/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): As the Deputy is aware, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science was founded in August 2020. My Department has achieved a number of key policy initiatives since its establishment which are helping to transform the landscape for tertiary education and for research and innovation in Ireland, providing a foundation for a leading knowledge-driven economy equipped for the future world of work as well as a bedrock for sustainable development of a more inclusive society for all. Key achievements include:

- The national Further Education and Training (FET) Strategy 2020-24, “*Future FET: Transforming Learning*” was launched in July 2020 and is framed around a vision for future FET in Ireland. Priorities for the sector are set out across three core pillars: building skills; creating pathways, and; fostering inclusion. There is also a strong focus on enabling themes, including staffing, capital investment and measurement and data.

- The “*Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025*” was launched in April 2021 and sets out a roadmap to fully embedding apprenticeship as an option for employers and learners across all sectors of the economy. Under the Plan, a National Apprenticeship Office will be established as a joint office of SOLAS and the HEA. Employer and partner engagement will continue through the establishment of a National Apprenticeship Alliance.

- My Department has been leading in collaboration with further and higher education stakeholders to provide direction and guidance throughout the pandemic with a focus on continuity in provision of service in a manner consistent with public health advice. Most recently I published the plan for a safe return to campus for September 2021, with the proposal being for mainly on-site activity for all students, learners, and staff. In addition, there will be some on-site provision over the summer months including on-site presence for apprentices, English Language Education, and the resumption of research activity, with appropriate protective measures in place.

- A €168 million package was also provided for third-level institutions and students, in order to cover costs incurred during the pandemic and to support students returning to college, including a doubling of the student assistant fund and €15m to support student access to technology including laptops.

- A public consultation to inform the development of the next National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education was launched in April 2021. The third National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education (2015-2021) sets out the Department’s current strategy to address underrepresentation in higher education by those groups identified in the plan. The vision of the current National Access Plan (NAP) is to ensure that the student body entering into, participating in and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland’s population.

- Government approval was obtained for the General Scheme of a Bill to reform the Higher Education Authority legislation and the General Scheme was published in May 2021. This marks a very significant milestone in a process to reform out-dated legislation and to put in place a new system with an appropriate balance between autonomy and accountability.

- In May 2021 Technological University status was granted to Athlone and Limerick Institutes of Technology. This is the third Technological University to be created since 2019 and shows a significant advancement of the programme to transform the landscape of higher education in Ireland, also critical in the catalysing greater regional collaboration and development.

- A National Consultation on the future of research and innovation in Ireland was launched in June 2021. This includes an online public consultation process which will take place over the coming weeks. In addition, key stakeholders across research, innovation, industry and civic society, will engage in a number of discussion fora. The outcomes from these consultation processes will mean stakeholders and the wider public will have a key voice to help inform the National Research and Innovation Strategy.

- A number of key interventions have helped in the context of the increased need for upskilling and reskilling in the context of the economic fallout from the pandemic, including initiatives under the July 2020 Stimulus package which provided an additional 35,500 places in the higher and further education sector and with 10,000 free courses for unemployed, self-employed or returners to work under Springboard+ 2021 announced in June 2021.

- A consultation on the 10-year Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy was undertaken in late 2020. Work on the development of this Strategy is ongoing with SOLAS and the Strategy is due to be launched in the near future. A review of the SUSI grant system is also

currently underway. The review will determine if the grant system reflects the realities of the current student experience with a view to facilitating access and underpinning an inclusive approach.

Equality Issues

380. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit are working towards enabling access to employment for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities, including, but not limited to, persons with disabilities, persons from ethnic minorities, Travellers, Mincéirí; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32741/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Inclusion is one of the core strategic goals for my Department, and my ambition is to ensure that we provide supports and opportunities for learning to all, recognising the needs of vulnerable learners and the most marginalised, and to assist people in access to and progression through higher and further education and training. A range of supports and measures are in place, which include the following:

The main support available to students is the statutory based Student Grant Scheme. Under the terms of the Student Grant Scheme, grant assistance is awarded to students attending an approved course in an approved institution who meet the prescribed conditions of funding including those which relate to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means. The decision on eligibility for a student grant is a matter, in the first instance, for the centralised student grant awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) to determine. Further information in relation to student grant assistance is available from SUSI's website, www.susi.ie. The telephone number for SUSI's Helpdesk is 0761 087 874.

Equity of Access to Higher Education continues to be a national priority for the Government and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The Programme for Government reflects the importance of supporting learners at risk of education disadvantage and learners with special education needs in higher education. The vision of National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2021 is that the student body entering, participating in, and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population. The plan set out five goals and more than thirty actions, developed following widespread consultation with stakeholders, with the aim of supporting increased access and participation in higher education by six main target groups.

Those groups include entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education; first-time mature students, students with disabilities, part-time/flexible learners, further education and training award holders; and Irish Travellers. The plan also indicated subgroups that require support, including lone parents, teen parents and ethnic minorities. Improving equity of access to higher education is an ongoing objective.

There are three main funding streams which support the implementation of the National Access Plan. These are:

- The Programme for Access to Higher Education;
- The Student Assistance Fund; and
- The Fund for Students with Disabilities

There are three strands to the Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) with an overall funding envelope of €40.4m. Strand 1 supports access to initial teacher education from the target groups identified in the National Access Plan. Strand 2 provides bursaries of €5,000 to students who have been identified by their higher education institution as being the most socio-economically disadvantaged students in the target groups under the National Access Plan. Strand 3 supports regional clusters of higher education institutions with the aim of attracting additional students from groups currently under-represented in higher education.

A new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education will be developed in 2021 for the years 2022-2026. Consultations on the approach to the development of the Plan is on-going.

The Student Assistance Fund (SAF) provides financial assistance to students experiencing financial difficulties while attending third level. Students can be assisted towards costs such as rent, childcare costs, transport costs and books/class materials. Students on full or part-time courses leading to a higher education award (NQF level 6-10) in the universities, institutes of technology and other approved colleges can apply for the SAF. The core allocation for the SAF is €9.1 million per annum which is expected to support circa 14,000 students. This includes €1 million which was added to the fund in 2017 for part-time students who are lone parents or members of the other access target groups. Prior to that the fund supported full-time students only. An additional €1 million was added to the fund in 2018 for students attending Professional Masters of Education (PME) courses, who are experiencing financial difficulty. This additional funding was also made available for the 2019/20 year and again in 2020/21.

The Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) supports participation by students with a disability in further and higher education. The FSD is one of the main funding sources supporting participation by students with disabilities in approved further and higher education courses in Ireland. It also supports students from Ireland to study on approved courses in Northern Ireland, the UK and other EU countries. The actual level of support to be provided to individual students is decided by each HEI who carry out a needs assessment to determine the types of supports and accommodations needed. The 2020 allocation to the fund is €9.6m which is expected to support circa 14,000 students. A significant development with this Fund has been the inclusion of students on part-time courses in 2018 and this continued into 2019 and 2020 also.

A progress review of the National Access Plan, published in December 2018, acknowledges a number of significant positive developments and characterises the first phase of implementation of the NAP as a period of achievement and investment. A major element of both progress to date and the future implementation of the plan has been the increased investment in new access initiatives since the original publication of the National Access Plan (NAP).

The objectives of the National Access Plan are supported by a range of interventions and programmes:

In response to the lower than anticipated progress for Travellers, an Action Plan for Increasing Traveller Participation in Higher Education 2019-2021 was launched in 2019 and its aim is to advance Traveller participation in higher education within the context of approaches on retention and transition of Travellers across the education spectrum.

A study commissioned by the Higher Education Authority on the challenges facing mature students participation in higher education has recently been published. The finding of the report will be considered in the context of the new National Access Plan 2022 – 2026 commencing in 2022.

In 2020 approximately €42 million within the core funding allocated to HEIs was in recognition of the additional costs of recruiting and retaining students from National Access Plan

target groups, including students with disabilities. This enables all HEIs to have an access infrastructure, including disability support services, in place that provides for the pre-entry and post-entry work required to support students from target groups access and successfully complete higher education.

Persons in the protection process (asylum and subsidiary protection) or leave to remain process are not eligible to access the statutory based SUSI grant scheme. However, the administratively based Student Support Scheme provides supports along similar lines to the SUSI grant scheme and is available to persons in the asylum, subsidiary protection or leave to remain process.

Budget 2021 provided for enhanced postgraduate supports from the 2021/22 academic year including the fee grant amount rising from €2,000 to €3,500 and the income threshold for eligibility for these grants increasing from €31,500, now €54,240. This is an initial step in meeting part of the Government's commitments regarding SUSI grant support.

Apart from the student grant and dedicated access supports it is important to note the range of additional supports which have been put in place for students as part of Budget 2021 and as part of the Government's COVID response last year.

My Department is committed to the continued the roll-out of supports for students and targeted initiatives to support delivery of the vision and targets within the National Access Plan.

The level of funding available in the Student Assistance Fund for 2020 was doubled;

- €1.9m in the form of a once-off COVID-19 contingency fund to enable HEIs deliver local COVID-19 responses to support disadvantaged students;

- The level of funding for the 1916 Bursary Fund (also known as PATH 2) increased to €5 million per annum, which will provide an additional 200 bursaries, bringing the total number for 2021 to 1,000 bursaries for the most disadvantaged students in the country;

- An additional €20 million in funding for SUSI in 2021 to cover increased applications to the scheme;

- €6 million allocated to enhance SUSI support for postgraduates;

- €15 million scheme to support access to laptops and digital devices;

- €50 million to provide financial assistance to full time third level students in recognition of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on this group. This funding will offer financial assistance to all EU full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students attending publicly funded Higher Education Institutions (HEI).

- €300,000 has been secured through the Dormant Accounts Fund for targeted supports to address the implications of COVID-19 on Traveller participation in higher education in 2021.

Fostering Inclusion is one of the three core pillars around which the Further Education and Training Strategy (FET) 2020-2024 is built. The FET sector is committed to increasing levels of inclusion through the provision of high quality, more accessible and flexible education and training programmes and supports suited to the identified needs of individuals, including persons with a disability, members of the Traveller and Roma communities, migrants and the unemployed, with the aim of enabling every citizen to participate fully in society.

SOLAS, working closely with my Department, has established multi-annual strategic performance agreements with the 16 ETBs. These agreements place a clear emphasis on inclusion

for all. In terms of promoting equity, one of the most significant features of these new agreements is the setting of quantitative targets for inclusion of priority cohorts, which are derived from a combination of specifically identified local needs and government strategies and action plans, as well as the relevant EU strategies and policies. The channelling of specific programme budgets and/or resources towards provision for a particular priority group or cohort would be a decision to be made by individual ETBs.

Under the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025 which was published in April the impacts of, and outcomes from, existing access to apprenticeship and pre-apprenticeship programmes as well as other interventions across the sector will be examined to provide an evidence base for best practice and future interventions to deliver an apprentice population which better reflects the general population.

Question No. 381 answered with Question No. 366.

Departmental Schemes

382. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the estimated cost to the Exchequer of restoring the grant adjacency rate to 24km; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32788/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The student maintenance grant is a contribution towards the living costs of a student. It is not intended to cover the full costs of attending college. The student grant scheme does however, provide for different levels of maintenance support, depending on means. Grants are also provided at adjacent and non-adjacent rates. The higher non-adjacent rates are intended to provide additional support to those students who may be living away from home.

Budget 2011 provided for a number of student grant measures which came into effect for the 2011/12 academic year, including the change in the assessment of the qualifying distance criterion for the non-adjacent rate of grant from 24 kilometres to 45 kilometres.

The 24km distance criterion was originally set in 1968 and had not been updated in more than 40 years. Since then, significant improvements have taken place in the road and rail network and it is considered that the revised distance criteria is more consistent with the type of distances that students may legitimately be expected to commute to college.

The current qualifying distance of 45km for the higher non-adjacent rate of student grant takes into account a reasonable radius within which students may commute on a daily basis.

The cost of reversing the change to the distance criteria in the Student Grant, is estimated to be in the region of €28.5m. The Programme for Government contains commitments to, among other things, review SUSI eligibility criteria, adjacency rates and postgraduate grant supports. On foot of these commitments approval was given to commence a review of the Student Grant Scheme which is well underway and is being conducted by external consultants. It is anticipated that the SUSI review will be completed later this year and will inform policy priorities for the next Estimates process and future considerations regarding the development of student grant policy.

Departmental Schemes

383. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education,

Research, Innovation and Science the estimated cost to the Exchequer of extending the SUSI grant to all level 6 further education and training courses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32789/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): According to most recent statistics available from the Department of Education, there were 9,486 full time Level 6* Post Leaving Certificate students (2018/19), while the total full time students registered for craft apprenticeship was 16,142 for the 2019/20 academic year. The average maintenance grant payable to a further education student is €1,995.

The estimated cost of extending the SUSI support for PLC Level 6 and training courses is €51.13m.

**Level 6 is the second year of study, as these students would have completed a one year Level 5 PLC course. There were 41,432 FET enrolments at level 5 for the 2018/19 academic year.*

The Programme for Government contains commitments to, among other things, review SUSI eligibility criteria, adjacency rates and postgraduate grant supports. On foot of these commitments approval was given to commence a review of the Student Grant Scheme. The review is being conducted by external consultants. It is anticipated that the SUSI review will be completed later this year and will inform policy priorities for the next Estimates process and future considerations regarding the development of student grant policy.

Source: www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Key-Statistics/education-indicators-for-ireland-2020.pdf.

Departmental Schemes

384. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the estimated cost to the Exchequer of extending the SUSI support for postgraduate courses to cover the full cost of fees; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32790/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The latest statistics from the HEA indicate that in the academic year 2018/19 there were 24,855 full-time post graduate students at approved institutions. Most EU and EEA students can expect the cost of fees for a year of full time study to be between €4,000 and €9,000. Based on an average cost of €6,500 the estimated cost of extending the SUSI support for post-graduate courses to cover the full cost of fees would be in the region of €161,557,000.

The Programme for Government contains commitments to, amongst other things, review SUSI eligibility criteria, adjacency rates and postgraduate grant supports. The review of the Student Grant Scheme is underway with over 250 submissions received via the public consultation process and over 9,000 survey responses were received through an online survey process. It is anticipated that the SUSI review will be completed later this year and will inform policy priorities for the next Estimates process and future considerations regarding the development of student grant policy. At this point I cannot pre-empt the outcome of the review to indicate when any proposed changes will come into effect.

Education and Training Boards

385. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education,

Research, Innovation and Science the status of plans to regularise the terms and conditions of adult education tutors employed by education and training boards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32472/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): The Labour Court has made a recommendation in relation to a claim brought by SIPTU and TUI in respect of regularising the terms and conditions of Adult Education Tutors employed by Education and Training Boards which has been under consideration by officials in my Department, the Department of Education and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

The recently ratified Public Service Agreement, Building Momentum, contains a mechanism to address outstanding adjudications, commitments, recommendations awards and claims within the terms of the quantum of the Sectoral Bargaining Fund available for agreed Sectoral Bargaining Units. My Department and officials from the Department of Education are engaging with the relevant unions to establish their sectoral bargaining priorities.

Seized Property

386. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Justice if it is possible to reclaim a relative's War of Independence firearm if it was surrendered to An Garda Síochána in the 1970s. [32572/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I have been informed by An Garda Síochána that many historical items, including firearms, have been donated or surrendered to them over the years.

I have been further advised by the Garda authorities that, unfortunately, without more detailed information they are unable to track the relevant item and ascertain if it is possible to return it.

Therefore, I would advise the Deputy that the individual who wishes to reclaim the firearm should contact An Garda Síochána directly who will be in a better position to assist in this regard.

EU Bodies

387. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Justice further to Parliamentary No. 174 of 19 May 2021, the reason Ireland has failed to provide the information relating to procedural time limits on the eJustice portal after more than three years; the actions she and her predecessor have taken during this time to ensure that this information is made available on the eJustice portal; the reason for the delay in providing information for the eJustice portal; if she will be amending or repealing section 18(h) of the Act in order that Irish citizens can enjoy the same data protection rights as all other EU citizens; and if not, the reason therefor. [32536/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As indicated to the Deputy in reply to his previous questions on this matter, the European eJustice Portal contains information on both European Union law and the national law of the Member States of the EU.

The Portal is maintained by the European Commission. Information is provided by Member States via the European Judicial Network (EJN). While membership of and responsibility for the EJN is spread across my Department and the Courts Service, the Courts Service is Ire-

land's primary contact point.

Under the provisions of the Courts Service Act 1998, management of the courts is the responsibility of the Courts Service, which is independent in its functions.

The factsheet on Irish procedural time-limits to which the Deputy refers, was removed from the Portal for updating on foot of changes to the relevant legislation. It was inadvertently not re-uploaded due to pressure of more significant work. The factsheet has been revised and uploaded to the e:Justice Portal and can be found at:

https://e-justice.europa.eu/279/EN/time_limits_on_procedures?IRELAND&member=1

Immigration Policy

388. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice her plans to grant a blanket amnesty to front-line essential workers going through the immigration process and living in direct provision in order that they have leave to remain in Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32569/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): Firstly, let me assure the Deputy that my Department has taken a pragmatic and compassionate approach to immigration and international protection arrangements in the context of COVID-19 and will continue to do so for as long as is necessary.

Furthermore, I fully acknowledge the important contribution that migrants have made to health and social care and other essential services in Ireland during the pandemic and beyond. I also recognise and acknowledge the crucial role front-line workers are continuing to play in responding to the threat of COVID-19. They work in a challenging environment and deal with vulnerable people on a daily basis. Their exceptional commitment has been particularly clear throughout the pandemic, during which they have been playing a key role in preventing the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

For those who are in the international protection process, our objective is to have decisions made on their applications, including the permission to remain consideration, as soon as possible. This ensures that those who are found to be in need of our protection can receive it quickly and begin rebuilding their lives here with a sense of safety and security.

In the context of the permission to remain element of the process, each case is given a detailed consideration on its individual merits under all of the prescribed headings, which includes a full consideration of their private and family rights in accordance with the European Convention on Human Rights, among other issues, before a decision is taken to grant or to refuse permission to remain.

I can also advise the Deputy that the issuing of letters recommending the refusal of international protection and permission to remain have been suspended since December and for the duration of Level 5 restrictions. The question of recommencing issuing these decisions will be kept under review in the coming weeks as the situation regarding international travel eases.

The same position also applies to the making and service of deportation orders, with the exception of some very limited circumstances in cases where an individual may be a threat to national security or whose presence in Ireland would be contrary to the public interest.

Finally, I can advise the Deputy that in cases where a Deportation Order has been made,

section 3(11) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) provides a mechanism under which a person subject to a Deportation Order can make a formal request to have that order revoked. Any such request, however, will need to be founded on new information or materially changed circumstances which have arisen since the decision to make the Deportation Order was taken. Any request made will be considered on its individual merits.

Departmental Correspondence

389. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Justice if she will address a matter regarding a proposal by a community group (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32573/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy will be aware, the Department of Justice is leading on the drafting of the implementation plan for the Drogheda Scoping Report, and is coordinating input from relevant departments, agencies and the Louth local authority to drive the recommendations forward. My Department will maintain an oversight role on the implementation of the scoping report, in close cooperation and coordination with other departments as well as the Louth local authority.

The publication of the implementation plan for the Drogheda Scoping Exercise is a key action in the Justice Plan 2021. As well as publishing the scoping report, my Department has identified some actions for early implementation which can be progressed in line with the finalisation of the implementation plan. As part of the input being sought from departments, the implementation plan will outline resources being put into the community in Drogheda. I look forward to bringing the implementation plan to Government in the near future.

I would further note that all applications for funding in any area of community safety that are received by my Department are welcome, and will receive appropriate and thorough consideration as part of the relevant funding assessment process.

Public Sector Pay

390. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice if her attention has been drawn to the fact that junior barristers can earn as little as €25 a day for court days; if she will reverse cuts to professional fees made during 2008 to 2011; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32584/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): As I outlined in my reply to Question No. 226 of 16 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.

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.

Departmental Expenditure

391. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Justice the amount her Department and associated agencies have spent on social media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32617/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department has spent €12,566.66 on social media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021. This was exclusively for boosting social media posts in relation to the 'No Excuses' awareness campaign on sexual harassment and sexual violence.

Two of the agencies under the aegis of my Department have incurred costs for social media advertising in the timeframe outlined, as set out in the table below.

Agency	Cost
Policing Authority	€1,191.85
An Garda Síochána	€2,599.00

Departmental Expenditure

392. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Justice the amount her Department has spent on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32634/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I wish to advise the Deputy, that my Department has had no spend on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021.

All content for social media is produced in-house with the exception of media campaigns such as the Still Here and No Excuses campaigns, for which there were no social media content production costs for the period in question.

Departmental Expenditure

393. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Justice the amount her Department and all associated agencies have spent on public relations consultancy costs since January 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32651/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department has had no public relations consultancy costs since January 2021.

Four of the agencies under the aegis of my Department have incurred costs for public relations consultancy services in the timeframe outlined, as set out in tabular form below.

Agency	Cost (€)
An Garda Síochána	79,008.82
Data Protection Commission	5,909.38
Irish Prison Service	541.00
Legal Services Regulatory Authority	1,250.00

Covid-19 Pandemic

394. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice when religious services will

recommence in prisons given vaccines are being rolled out and social distancing is possible; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32671/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I can advise the Deputy that the Irish Prison Service is currently developing a new Framework for the Unwinding of Prison Restrictions which is informed by the recent Government Plan for reopening our society, set out in Resilience and Recovery: The Path Ahead.

The new Framework for Unwinding Prison Restrictions, which will be published later this month by the Service, will set out a phased unwinding of the restrictions that were introduced to prevent the possible of spread of Covid-19 into our prisons. A date for the resumption of religious services will be agreed as part of these wider plans.

While the unwinding of prison restrictions and the resumption of religious services is a priority for the Irish Prison Service, it is subject to a number of critical factors including:

- The need to maintain infection control measures
- The roll out of the prison vaccination programme for both prisoners and staff
- The roll out of the community vaccination programme

The Prison Service must take account of the risks of Covid-19 transmission in a congregated setting and the fact that a large cohort of people in custody and staff working in our prisons have not yet been fully vaccinated when reviewing the unwinding of prison restrictions.

In this regard, a vaccination programme commenced on 9th June 2021, on a prison by prison basis, with vaccinations being administered by the National Ambulance Service, supported by Irish Prison Service health care teams to all prisoners, and unvaccinated staff under 40 years of age.

Revised guidelines and controls for the safe celebration of religious services have been developed and approved and I wish to advise the Deputy that Chaplains have continued to work in all prison establishments during lockdowns, providing spiritual and pastoral support services.

Departmental Policies

395. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Justice if she will outline her key policy achievements in her Department since 27 June 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32721/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department has already made significant progress on the commitments set out in the Programme for Government. The Justice Plan 2021 was published earlier this year and outlines a wide range of actions under the Department’s five strategic goals, which are:

1. Tackle crime, enhance national security and transform policing
2. Improve access to justice and modernise the courts system

Under the Justice Plan 2021, I am progressing a suite of policy and legislative reforms which are priorities for me as Minister, in line with the various commitments set out in the Programme for Government.

My Department has made substantial progress on delivery reforms recommended by the

Commission on the Future of Policing, including publication of the landmark General Scheme of the Policing, Security and Community Safety Bill, which provides for wide-ranging and coherent reform of policing by improving the performance and accountability of our policing and security services, and supporting the human rights of all people throughout Ireland to be and feel safe in their communities.

Further key actions to tackle crime include the publication earlier this year of the General Scheme of the Hate Crime Bill; the publication of the Hamilton Review and subsequent implementation plan on tackling white collar crime; delivering on Ireland's successful connection to Schengen Information System (SIS II) which has already led to an increased number of arrests; and enactment of the Criminal Procedure Act 2021 will improve efficiencies in the criminal trial process, by introducing preliminary trial hearings for the first time.

The Peter Kelly Report, *Reform of Civil Justice in the State* has been published and we have also progressed work to reform the family justice system. Last September, Government approved the General Scheme of the Family Court Bill which will restructure the family justice system to enable jurisdictions in appropriate Courts. In parallel, the Family Justice Oversight Group are working to develop a new family justice system.

We have also published the General Scheme of the Judicial Appointments Commission Bill which will replace the Judicial Appointments Advisory Board with a new Commission and established a Judicial Planning Working Group to work on judicial numbers over the medium term. On the issue of gambling reform, the Gaming and Lotteries (Amendment) Act 2019 came into effect in December 2020. Work is ongoing to establish a gambling regulator.

Strengthen the safety of all communities is a cross-Government priority and we are establishing three pilots of Local Community Safety Partnerships (in Dublin's North Inner City, Longford and Waterford) which will inform the roll-out of the new Community Safety model nationwide.

As the Deputy will know, we are making strides in providing greater supports to victims of crime, and combating domestic, sexual and gender based violence and have published and begun to implement *Supporting a Victim's Journey*, our plan to implement the recommendations of the O'Malley Review. We have enacted Coco's Law - the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act.

To support young people and divert them away from crime, a new Youth Justice Strategy 2021-2027 has been put in place and is being implemented; we have established an Anti-Social Behaviour Forum to bring forward proposals to tackle the issue of anti-social behaviour and have published the General Scheme of the Criminal Justice (Exploitation of Children in the Commission of Offences) Bill. I also expect to publish an implementation plan to deliver on the recommendations put forward in the Drogheda Scoping Report shortly.

In terms of developments in the immigration area, work on an end-to-end review of processes to guide enhanced processing times has been completed. We have announced draft proposals for a scheme to regularise thousands of undocumented migrants in Ireland and introduced a temporary system to enable citizenship applicants to complete their naturalisation process by signing a *statutory declaration* of loyalty.

Of course it is important to note that all the above mentioned milestones and achievements are just a snapshot of the substantial programme of work being delivered on by my Department. The full Justice Plan 2021 is available at:

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Department_of_Justice_Action_Plan_2021.pdf/Files/De-

partment_of_Justice_Action_Plan_2021.pdf

I intend to publish regular reports outlining progress on these actions on my Department's website and my Department will continue to work with our agencies and partners across the sector to receive feedback and ensure that the targets set out in the Plan are met. I look forward to publishing a mid-year report outlining progress in due course.

Equality Issues

396. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice the way in which her Department and agencies under her remit are working towards enabling access to employment for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities, including, but not limited to, persons with disabilities, persons from ethnic minorities, Travellers, Mincéirí; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32743/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department and the agencies under its remit are committed to ensuring a safe, fair and inclusive Ireland, where regardless of ethnicity or background, every person is treated and valued equally.

As the Deputy may be aware, Part 5 of the Disability Act 2005 provides for a statutory report on the employment of people with disabilities in the public sector.

The Department's 2020 report indicated that 5.1% of employees in my Department and the agencies under my remit reported having a disability. This exceeds the 3% target of employment of persons with disabilities set in the Disability Act 2005.

The Department is currently working with members of the Traveller and Roma Community to launch an internship programme for members of their community later this year. This internship programme was developed in line with the National Traveller and Roma Community Inclusion Strategy (2017 – 2021) and aims to promote the participation and inclusion of the Traveller and Roma community in Irish society.

This year the Department will roll out Disability and Autism Awareness training to all staff in line with the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2121.

My Department takes part in the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) programme; an initiative of the Association for Higher Education Access and Disability (AHEAD), which offers a six-month paid mentored work experience placement to graduates with disabilities. There are currently two graduates with disabilities on WAM placements.

The Courts Service

The Courts Service understands and takes seriously its statutory duty to eliminate discrimination, promote equality and protect the human rights of all staff and service users.

A Human Rights and Equality Working Group has been established, which works to assess and identify the human rights and equality issues that are relevant to the functions of the Courts. The group meets weekly to identify the policies and practices that are already in place, and to determine those that should be implemented across the organisation in a bid to address any inequality.

The Courts Service is strongly committed to meeting the requirements set out under the Civil Service Code of Practice for the Employment of People with Disabilities.

Its 2020 Staff Disability Census indicated that 5.5% of current staff reported having a disability. This is on target to meet the Government increase to the public service employment target for persons with disabilities from a minimum of 3% to 6% by 2024.

Irish Prison Service

The Irish Prison Service is exempt from the Public Sector Employment disability target in respect of Recruit Prison Officers but is committed to enabling access to employment for persons from minority and disadvantaged backgrounds.

The Probation Service

One of the key organisations funded by the Probation Service is the Irish Association for Social Inclusion Opportunities (IASIO).

The largest of IASIO's programmes, **Linkage** is a training, employment and guidance service, which supports offenders to integrate into the working community.

Legal Aid Board

The Legal Aid Board reports that 6% of staff reported having a disability in 2020.

Legal Services Regulatory Authority

The Legal Services Regulatory Authority (LSRA) is working to increase the public sector employment target of persons with disabilities from 3% to 6% by 2024, and will embed this target into all LSRA workforce planning and recruitment policies.

Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission

All open recruitment to posts in the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission (GSOC) is conducted by the Public Appointments Service (PAS) which operates an Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (ED&I) Strategy, which recognises and values the importance of attracting and welcoming a workforce that is responsive, accessible, resilient, and reflective of the communities it serves.

This strategy is in line with the Vision, Mission and Values stated in GSOC's Statement of Strategy for the period 2021-2023. Based on these principles, GSOC will continue to work with PAS towards ensuring that persons from minority and disadvantaged communities are encouraged to apply for suitable employment opportunities as they arise in the organisation.

International Protection Appeals Tribunal

Since January 2020 the tribunal has facilitated two internships under the Willing and Able Mentoring Programme. These six-month placements are for graduates who have a disability.

An Garda Síochána

An Garda Síochána's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2020-2021 outlines its commitment to 'attract, develop and retain a diverse workforce to support delivery of an effective policing service to the communities they serve'.

The EDI Strategy contains a number of specific actions to support An Garda Síochána to fulfil this goal including Action 5; 'Support the development of a diversity recruitment roadmap'.

In January 2021 a consultative exercise was completed by eight civil society organisations and serving personnel with diverse backgrounds within AGS. There was positive engagement,

and constructive feedback was provided on the recruitment and retention barriers encountered by members of various disadvantaged and minority communities.

A draft implementation plan outlining short and medium terms initiatives to address the barriers identified has been developed. In addition to these initiatives, this implementation plan includes:

- Recruitment targets for groups currently under-represented within An Garda Síochána based on current baselines and national census data.
- A commitment to improve equality data collection and analysis at each phase of the recruitment journey, in partnership with the Public Appointment Service.
- A commitment to review international norms and best practices in police vetting procedures (a highly complex barrier identified during the consultation requiring a more long-term approach).

Implementation of this plan is scheduled to happen in advance of the 2021 Garda Trainee Competition.

Over 500 young people in socio-economically disadvantaged areas applied to the upcoming Garda Access Programme. The successful candidates will be placed in suitable roles across the organisation for nine and eleven month paid placements. The interns will also benefit from a bespoke training and development programme, which aims to develop their knowledge of policing and the criminal justice sector, and to increase key workplace skills.

Shortlisting is currently underway with interviews anticipated to be held the week beginning 28/06/21.

Policing Authority

The Policing Authority is an equal opportunity employer, it conducts competitions in a fair and inclusive manner in line with the CPSA Code of Practice, and facilitates all reasonable accommodations necessary for staff who may have additional requirements.

The Authority is very aware of its commitments in this regard and despite its small numbers, exceeds the 3% target for employment of persons with disabilities.

Naturalisation Applications

397. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of eligibility for naturalisation in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32781/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): An application for a certificate of naturalisation was received from the person referred to by the Deputy on 30 July 2019. The application is currently being processed with a view to establishing whether they meet the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision when processing is complete.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their application without delay. However, the nature of the naturalisation process is such that, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. In some instances, completing the necessary checks can take a considerable period of time.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility at INISOireachtasMail@justice.ie, which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Question process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in the cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Harbours and Piers

398. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if there are funding pathways open to Rathmullan Pier to apply for funding through his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32590/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine owns, operates and maintains six designated State-owned Fishery Harbour Centres, located at Castletownbere, Dingle, Dunmore East, Howth, Killybegs and Ros An Mhíl under statute. In addition, the Department also has responsibility for the upkeep and maintenance of North Harbour at Cape Clear, as well as the maintenance of a small number of specific piers, lights and beacons throughout Ireland, in accordance with the Marine Works (Ireland) Act 1902, and piers, lights and beacons constructed under the auspices of the Congested Districts Board.

Rathmullan Pier is owned by Donegal County Council and responsibility for its maintenance and development rests with that Local Authority in the first instance and its parent Department, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage thereafter.

The Department provides funding to assist the 14 coastal Local Authorities, including Donegal County Council, in carrying out small scale projects for the development and repair of Local Authority owned piers, harbours and slipways under the annual Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme, subject to available Exchequer funding and overall national priorities. Between the years 2010-2020, Donegal County Council has received funding of €3.8m under this programme, with €31k of this allocated for works at Rathmullan Pier.

Funding of €4.2m has been approved for the Local Authority element of my Department's 2021 Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme. Additionally, I am pleased to inform you that Donegal County Council has secured funding of €637.5k under this year's programme, to undertake 12 projects in total (nine Harbour Development and three Marine Leisure & Tourism).

No application for funding in relation to Rathmullan Pier was received under this year's programme.

Should any application be submitted by Donegal County Council in relation to Rathmullan Pier under any future programme, it will be given due consideration, taking into account the terms and conditions of the scheme, the priority attached by the Council and available funds.

Departmental Expenditure

399. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount his Department and associated agencies have spent on social media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32607/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine provides public information about a wide range of schemes, services and policies. Social media is one of the channels used to communicate this information.

During the period from the beginning of January 2021 until 12th June 2021, the Department spent €969.85 (incl. VAT) on advertising on social media.

As regards the twelve State Bodies under the aegis of the Department, the information requested is an operational matter for the State Bodies themselves. I have therefore referred the Deputy's question to the Agencies and have requested that a response should issue to the Deputy within 10 days.

Departmental Expenditure

400. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount his Department has spent on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32624/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department provides public information about a wide range of schemes, services and policies. Social media is one of the channels used to communicate this information.

During the period from the beginning of January 2021 until 12th June 2021, the Department spent €2,152.50 (incl. VAT) on content produced for use on social media.

Departmental Expenditure

401. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount his Department and all associated agencies have spent on public relations consultancy costs since January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32641/21]

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 has not incurred expenditure for public relations consultancy during the period January 2021 to date in 2021.

As regards the twelve State Bodies under the aegis of the Department, the information requested is an operational matter for the State Bodies themselves. I have therefore referred the Deputy's question to the Agencies and have requested that a response should issue to the Deputy within 10 days.

Forestry Sector

402. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of a tree felling licence application by a person (details supplied); if the application

will be expedited given the applicant has provided the NIA statement; the total number of applications that remain to be processed; the breakdown of the length of time the applications that have been in the system by month; the number of applications being approved on a weekly basis; his plans to clear the backlog; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32661/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The application for a tree felling licence for the person named was received on 25th June 2019. A revised Natura Impact Statement (NIS) was received on 13th April, 2021 and the file has been assigned to an ecologist for assessment. This usually takes two to three months.

Once that work is complete, the application will be returned to the Forestry District Inspector, who will complete the assessment and make their recommendations. The recommendations will form part of the decision on the application, which will be issued to the person named, when available.

My Department receives applications for forestry licences and issues decisions daily. There will always be applications in the system at various stages, from the earliest steps in an application before it is fully submitted, right through to decision. The total number of applications on hand is 6,058, which includes 1,745 applications recently submitted by Coillte.

We intend to issue 4,500 licences this year which is a 75% increase on last year and we remain committed to that target. Licences issued year to date are 20% ahead of last year. Weekly updates are provided in our published forestry dashboard.

The average length of time to decision for felling licences for those decided in 2021 is 12 months. It is ten months for afforestation and nine months for roads.

The clearing of the backlog of licences is a priority for Minister of State Hackett who has responsibility for forestry and myself. Increased resources have been invested in dealing with files on hand and under Project Woodland a dedicated group, Working Group 1, is tasked with looking at the backlog.

This Group has already met nine times and has examined in detail the cases on hand and is producing specific recommendations for improving output, including a definition of the backlog, which will be brought to the Project Board for consideration.

Forestry Sector

403. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the Backlog Working Group established as part of Project Woodland; the suggestions by the Group to solve the forestry licencing crisis; his plans for the implementation of these recommendations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32676/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The clearing of the backlog of licences is a priority for myself and Minister of State Pippa Hackett, who is responsible for forestry. Increased resources have been invested in dealing with files on hand and, under Project Woodland, a dedicated group, Working Group 1, is tasked with looking at the backlog.

This Group has already met nine times and has examined in detail the cases on hand and is producing specific recommendations for improving output, including a definition of the backlog, which will be brought to the Project Board for consideration. Furthermore, the group on Forestry Policy is meeting next week at which a full update on progress to date will be provided

to all stakeholders.

Forestry Sector

404. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if consideration is being given to the introduction of statutory timelines with respect to the issuing of forestry licences; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32678/21]

405. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he is considering wholesale regulatory reform with respect to the issuing of forestry licences in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32679/21]

406. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he is reviewing the 15 km screening radius with respect to forestry projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32680/21]

407. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter (details supplied). [32681/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 404, 405, 406 and 407 together.

Project Woodland, which was launched in February this year, is a framework which aims to review and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the forestry licensing system, as well as developing a strategy for woodland creation. The structure of the Project is that four Working Groups, each chaired by an independent person and made up of stakeholders from the Forestry Policy Group, report to a Project Board, chaired by the Secretary General of the Department.

Working Group 3 is, among other things, developing a communication strategy, including a Customer Charter. The Customer Charter will include timelines for the issuing of forestry licences and it is within this Group that all matters in relation to timelines will be considered.

Working Group 4 is concentrating on licencing process improvements. This Group has indicated that it intends to recommend to the Project Board that an independent review of the regulatory process, taking account of international practice, be commissioned. This will include an examination of the criteria used for screening for Appropriate Assessment under the Habitats Directive.

As regards the increase from 3km to 15km for screening purposes the advice referred to was received from our external environmental consultants at the time. When added to NPWS guidance and decisions from the Forestry Appeals Committee, the Department moved from a screening distance of 3km to 15km to consider all European sites within that distance.

The work currently underway and due to be undertaken to examine the licensing process within Project Woodland will, I hope, lead to an improvement in output which will benefit the forestry sector as a whole.

Question No. 405 answered with Question No. 404.

Question No. 406 answered with Question No. 404.

Question No. 407 answered with Question No. 404.

Climate Action Plan

408. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the current and capital costs involved with each action item in the Interim Climate Action Plan under his Department's responsibility. [32692/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Interim Climate Action Plan is funded through the Department's voted expenditure of €1.82bn in 2021. The majority of actions are funded through the rural development, forestry and research budget lines. Other actions in the plan do not require public funding while others form part of existing regulatory requirements or existing animal disease eradication programmes and, therefore, climate-related costs are not delineated.

Forestry Sector

409. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will introduce a reconstitution scheme for the forestry sector to support owners of woodlands affected by detrimental frost damage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32710/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department is aware of a request from the forestry sector for a reconstitution scheme in response to frost damage on young plantations.

The business case for such a scheme is being analysed.

Departmental Policies

410. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will outline his key policy achievements in his Department since 27 June 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32711/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Since publication of the Programme for Government in June 2020, the Department has been progressing the 161 actions identified in the "Agriculture, Food and the Marine" chapter, as well as actions in other chapters for which it has shared responsibility. A review of these PFG commitments is currently underway and the results will be available shortly. On 14th April, I published the Department's Statement of Strategy 2021-2024 alongside an Action Plan for 2021, which outlines 75 actions to further develop a sustainable, innovative and competitive agri-food, forestry and seafood sector. The Action Plan will build on significant work already underway by the Department.

The following are the key policy priorities for 2021:

1. Continuing to provide vital supports to the farmers, fishers and foresters which are the lifeblood of a balanced rural and coastal economy and community.

2. Finalising and publishing a new 10-year Strategy for the agri-food sector - delivering on a key commitment of the Programme for Government, which called for an ambitious blueprint for the sector for the years ahead, taking into account our climate action and environmental obligations.

3. Developing Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan.

4. Designing, developing and commencing new transitional schemes for 2021 including an Agri-Environment results-based Pilot Project which rewards farmers for committed environmental effort by linking payments to the quality of environmental outcomes delivered.

5. Implementing Ireland's first over-arching Animal Welfare Strategy.

6. Working to develop initiatives and policies to underpin and support farm and fisher incomes.

Departmental Funding

411. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will list the specific funding allocated by his Department on research into the unique characteristics of biogenic methane; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32728/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Climate research remains a key priority for me in my role as Minister. This commitment was clearly evident in the AgClimatise Roadmap which I published in December 2020. The benefits of research and innovation are clear, a number of new mitigation options have emerged on the back of publically-funded research, for example, protected urea fertiliser to reduce nitrous oxide emissions.

The Department has also been very invested in the research space with regard to biogenic methane investing over €2m in various projects. At a national level, a significant research grant was awarded to a Teagasc coordinated project called Meth-Abate which is looking at novel technologies to reduce methane emissions.

METH-ABATE	Development and validation of novel technologies to reduce methane emissions from pasture based Irish agricultural systems	€1,248,221.65	Teagasc-GRG (NUIG, QUB, AFBI)
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I am also aware of the importance of engaging internationally on collaborative research projects, particularly from a resource efficiency perspective. Through the European Union ERA-NET funding process, the Department has committed funding to seven additional projects which have biogenic methane as a core theme. These projects are listed below:

Acronym	Title	Total DAFM Grant Award to Irish participants	IE Lead and Collaborating Institutions	Partner Countries
MilKey	Decision support system for sustainable and GHG optimised milk production in key European areas	€230,658.04	Teagasc (UCD)	DE, PL, EL, BE, FR, NO
GrassToGas	Grass To Gas: Strategies to mitigate GHG emissions from pasture based sheep systems	€286,518.20	Teagasc (ICBF)	UK, FR, NZ, NO, TK, UY
MELS	Mitigating greenhouse gas emissions from livestock systems	€201,358.20	Teagasc (UCC)	DK, PL, UK, NZ, FR, DE, CL
SeaSolutions	Seaweeds and seaweed-ingredients to reduce enteric methane emissions from pasture-based sheep, cattle and dairy cows	€300,843.90	Teagasc (ITS)	NO, SE, DE, UK, CA

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Acronym	Title	Total DAFM Grant Award to Irish participants	IE Lead and Collaborating Institutions	Partner Countries
GHG-Manage	Managing and reporting of greenhouse gas emissions and carbon sequestration in different landscape mosaics	€236,133.75	UCD (coordinator) (Teagasc)	DE, FR, PL, NL
METHLAB	Refining direct fed microbials (DFM) and silage inoculants for reduction of methane emissions from ruminants	€218,920.00	Teagasc (coordinator) (UCC)	FR, NL, NZ, IT
RumenPredict	Predicting appropriate GHG mitigation strategies based on modelling variables that contribute to ruminant environmental impact	€244,418.07	Teagasc (UCD, ICBF)	UK, FI, NZ, SE, NL, FR

I remain confident that the outputs of this research will contribute to the overall goal of developing practical solutions that will enable Irish farmers reduce livestock methane emissions over the years ahead.

Agriculture Industry

412. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to revise the legally defined tolerances currently used to verify the accuracy of the automated beef grading in meat plants; his views on whether the current 40% tolerance is acceptable when machines can be 95% accurate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32729/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): There are currently 22 factories operating mechanical classification in Ireland representing approximately 90% of the national kill. Mechanical grading in beef factories is underpinned by two pieces of EU legislation which came into force in July 2018. Carcase classification is also governed by S.I. 249 of 2019.

Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2017/1184 of 20 April 2017 sets out the legal tolerances for the authorisation of a mechanical classification system. The figure of 40% referred to by the Deputy relates to the authorisation procedure for a mechanical classification system and not the operation of machines. Using a system of points and limits defined in the EU legislation, a mechanical classification system must achieve an accuracy figure in excess of 60% for conformation and fat cover in order for it to be authorised for use in any EU state. Irish legislation is fully aligned with EU regulation in this regard.

Unannounced checks by classification officers verify the on-going accuracy of the automated beef grading methods using the same system of points and limits defined in the EU legislation. In 2020, during 314 checks, across the 22 mechanical grading factories, the average performance for conformation in 2020 was 93.3% and 95.6% for fat cover.

The role of the Department is clearly defined in the Irish legislation in terms of monitoring and supervision of classification. This legislation is constantly kept under review.

Agriculture Industry

413. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the

number of times in each of the past five years that mechanical grading was suspended in meat plants following an inspection by his Department; the corresponding figure to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32730/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In the past five years (2016-2021 to date), officers from the Carcase Classification Division of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine conducted 2,911 inspections in total, across 32 factories classifying carcasses. The average number of inspections significantly exceed the requirement under the relevant EU legislation. The EU legal requirement for monitoring classification is a minimum of eight inspections per factory per year and must include a minimum of 40 carcasses at each inspection.

In each of the past five years, including 2021 to date, the average number of inspections per factory was 18 with an average of 85 carcasses inspected at each inspection. The number of inspections in 2020 was reduced because of COVID-19 restrictions but continued to exceed the number required by legislation.

Unannounced checks by classification officers verify the on-going accuracy of the automated beef grading methods by using a system of points and limits defined in EU legislation. The mechanical classification method must operate within legally defined tolerances at all times. As with any mechanical system, grading machines can from time to time fall out of tolerance. The suspension of mechanical grading following an inspection by the Department is summarised in the table below. To date in 2021, mechanical classification was suspended on one occasion following an inspection by classification officers.

Where a machine is found operating outside of tolerance, the factory is instructed to cease mechanical classification. When any mechanical system is found to be working outside of these tolerances, the meat plants concerned are instructed to revert to manual grading. In this scenario, the factory must arrange for the classification machine to be serviced. When this service is completed, the classification section is notified, and classification officers will proceed to conduct a further classification exercise (min 100 carcasses) to confirm that it is in working within the legal tolerances before mechanical grading is allowed to recommence. Farmers are advised through their remittance dockets where manual grading is applied.

Year	Number of Inspections	Number of Instances where a machine was turned off following an Inspection by the Department of Agriculture
2016	616	10
2017	628	13
2018	550	8
2019	580	6
2020	405	4
2021 to date	132	1

Equality Issues

414. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the way in which his Department and agencies under his remit are working towards enabling access to employment for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities, including, but not limited to persons with disabilities, persons from ethnic minorities, Travellers, Mincéirí; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32733/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine is committed to promoting and maintaining an inclusive and diverse workplace for all employees and the Diversity, Equality and Inclu-

sion policy, which was launched in 2018 builds on the Department's core values in the areas of equality, diversity and inclusion.

The Department is a long time supporter of providing employment opportunities for persons with disabilities and has participated for many years in the Willing Able Mentoring (WAM) Programme. This programme provides a six month paid and mentored work placement for graduates with a disability. In the last few years, the Department has increased the number of placements it has made available under the WAM programme. Many former participants of the programme have gone on to secure permanent employment in the Civil Service.

The Department has participated in the Job Shadow Initiative on a continuous basis since 2009. Job Shadow Day is a national project, bringing people with disabilities and local employers together for one day to promote equal employment opportunities.

Following the launch of the Oireachtas Work Learning programme (OWL) by the Ceann Comhairle in September 2018, the Department has collaborated with the Houses of the Oireachtas to provide learning opportunities for trainees on this programme. The OWL programme is a learning, development and socialisation programme for young adults with an intellectual disability. The programme aims to provide a real and applied learning experience to the participants in a safe and secure work environment, to support them in developing the skills which will lead them to access paid employment in the open labour market.

The Department will continue to explore further options to provide employment opportunities for persons from minority and disadvantaged communities.

The question of enabling access to employment for persons from minority and/or disadvantaged communities in the State Agencies under the aegis of the Department is an operational matter for the Agencies themselves and I will ask the Agencies to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Fishing Industry

415. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will increase the allocation of the mackerel quota to boats under 18m; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32750/21]

416. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will increase the allocation of the mackerel quota for fishing by means of hook and line or line caught by vessels under 15m; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32751/21]

417. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on proposals by an organisation (details supplied) in relation to Irish linecaught mackerel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32752/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 415, 416 and 417 together.

Management of the National Mackerel quota is set down in Ministerial Policy which has been developed and put in place over a number of years. The allocation of 400 tonnes for a fishery for smaller vessels using hook and line as a means of fishing was set down in Ministerial Policy in 2010. The Minister amended the Mackerel policy in July 2017 after intensive review and public consultation. This amendment did not involve the hook and line fishery.

The mackerel Policy sets down that the hook and line fishery for vessels under 15m in overall length receive 400t.

In order to amend Mackerel Policy, I as Minister must be satisfied that there is satisfactory evidence of changed circumstances to justify a policy review. If I consider there is a case for review of any aspect of policy, it would require due process involving an assessment of all issues arising, including full public consultation.

There has been for the past 20 years or so intensive competition within the industry for access to and a higher share of the mackerel quota. The EU/U.K. Trade and Co-operation Agreement provides for the transfer of 26% of Ireland's mackerel quota by 2026 to the U.K. This will only increase demands for higher shares of Ireland's quota from all sectors within the fishing fleet. It is worth noting that the 400t for the hook and line fishery has not been reduced. Unfortunately the situation is that if there is an increase for any sector, such as the hook and line fishery, it must be taken from others who are already facing significant cuts under the EU/U.K. TCA.

The National Inshore Forum prepared a paper requesting to increase for the hook and line fishery from the 400t limit to 3,000 tonnes and to increase the trip limit from 750kg to 1,500kg. An increase in the overall 400t limit is set down in Policy. The other elements of this paper and improved management arrangements for the fishery were discussed by the Quota Management Advisory Committee.

Question No. 416 answered with Question No. 415.

Question No. 417 answered with Question No. 415.

Common Agricultural Policy

418. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which he and his Department have analysed and continue to analyse the potential impact of the current CAP reform on the agri-food sector; if he has studied submission from organisations (details supplied) regarding the impact of CAP on the industry; if he is in a position to reassure the industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32767/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department is continuing to monitor and analyse the mandatory and voluntary options present in the CAP proposals that are currently under discussion. In this regard, there are examples of modelling and analysis that have previously been carried out on the Department's website at the link below and there will be more of this type of analysis published as the regulations become clearer in the future.

The Department has consulted widely with all of the stakeholders, in particular through the mechanisms offered by the CAP Consultative Committee. This has included a series of in depth discussions on Direct Payments measures in February this year as an example. This consultation and exchange of views will continue as we continue to progress the preparation of the CAP Strategic Plan.

I will continue work to ensure the best possible outcome for farmers and farming in Ireland.

www.gov.ie/en/publication/76026-common-agricultural-policy-cap-post-2020/.

Agriculture Industry

419. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which alternative markets for the agri-food sector previously dependent on the UK market have been found to date; the particular areas in which difficulties have been experienced; the extent to which his Department is actively engaged to find alternative markets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32768/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Developing increased trade opportunities continues to be an integral part of the Department's response to the challenges posed by Brexit.

The key challenge here is to continue to maximise the volume and value of Irish agri-food exports to all destinations, and to anticipate and, as best we can, mitigate the potential impact of adverse developments in trading patterns. This requires a two-handed approach, comprised of support for our existing and potential future UK trade, as well as further development and diversification in EU and third country markets.

The Department and its agencies have invested hugely in this work and encouragingly, despite an extremely challenging year in 2020, exports totalled €14.3 billion, with 37% of agri-food exports going to the UK, which is down from 40% in 2016, the year the UK voted to leave the EU. Remaining agri-food exports in 2020 were split between the EU-27 market (31%) and international market (32%) in 2020.

The UK remains a priority market for Irish agri-food exporters. The Trade and Cooperation Agreement reached by the EU and the UK provides for zero tariffs and quotas, and is welcome given the highly integrated Ireland-UK supply chains and the value of trade in both directions. It will assist Irish exporters to maintain their UK market share, and to remain competitive against third country imports to the UK.

The Department continues to be very active in the development of third country markets through Trade Missions and key customer engagements; these were carried out virtually in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We are also continuing to work on the opportunities provided by recent EU Free Trade Agreements with third countries, and to press for the removal of technical market access barriers across a range of third country markets.

Departmental Schemes

420. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of applications received for a scheme (details supplied); the number successfully accepted to the scheme by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32792/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I was delighted to see the huge level of interest in REAP, demonstrated by over 10,800 applications being received by the Department. I was also pleased to be in a position to increase the original anticipated participation numbers in the project.

Now, almost 5,000 farmers will be supported to undertake environmental commitments to increase the environmental value of existing farm features. This figure is more than double the original participation figure envisioned. The number of successful applicants by county is provided in the table below.

COUNTY	Approvals
Carlow	48
Cavan	259
Clare	306
Cork	246
Donegal	458
Dublin	2
Galway	778
Kerry	219
Kildare	16
Kilkenny	57
Laois	64
Leitrim	167
Limerick	159
Longford	158
Louth	18
Mayo	628
Meath	91
Monaghan	147
Offaly	94
Roscommon	336
Sligo	206
Tipperary	182
Waterford	28
Westmeath	147
Wexford	31
Wicklow	81
Total	4,926

Departmental Expenditure

421. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the vote headings and sub-headings for her Department in tabular form. [32545/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The relevant Vote headings and sub-headings for my Department are published on an annual basis in the Revised Estimates Volume which is available on the gov.ie website at the following link <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/e20037-revised-estimates>.

For the information of the Deputy the table below provides this detail for 2021.

Vote Heading	Sub-heading	Main programme areas funded (where applicable)
A. Rural Development & Regional Affairs	A.1 Administration - Pay	
	A.2 Administration - Non Pay	
	A.3 Western Development Commission	
	A.4 Rural Supports	CLÁR, Local Improvement Scheme,
	A.5 LEADER - Rural Economy Sub programme	

Questions - Written Answers

Vote Heading	Sub-heading	Main programme areas funded (where applicable)
	A.6 Regional Economic Development	
	A.7 Rural Regeneration & Development	Rural Regeneration & Development Fund, Town & Village Renewal Scheme, Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme
	A.8 Islands	
B. Community Development	B.1 Administration - Pay	
	B.2 Administration - Non Pay	
	B.3 Supports for Community & Voluntary Sector (Nat Lott)	Volunteering Supports, Scheme to Support National Organisations, Seniors Alert Scheme, Social Inclusion Units, Public Participation Networks
	B.4 SICAP, Local/Regional Community Supports (Nat Lott)	
	B.5 Local Community Development Committees (Support)	
	B.6 Support for Disadvantaged Communities	
	B.7 Dormant Account Measures	
	B.8 Programme for PEACE & Reconciliation	
	B.9 Water Safety Ireland	
	B.10 Libraries Development & Archive Services	
	B.11 Community Enhancement Programme	
	B.12 Community Services Programme	
	B.13 Covid-19 Stability Fund	
C. Charities Regulatory Authority	C.1 Administration - Pay	
	C.2 Administration - Non Pay	
	C.3 Charities Regulatory Authority	
	C.4 Charities Appeals Tribunal	

Departmental Expenditure

422. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the amount her Department and associated agencies have spent on social media advertising since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32619/21]

423. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the amount her Department has spent on social media content production since the beginning of January 2021 until 12 June 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32636/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 422 and 423 together.

My Department has spent €4,798.52 on social media advertising and €36,322.44 on social media content production during the period in question.

The amount spent by agencies under my Department's remit on social media advertising for the same period is set out below.

Agency	Amount
Pobal	Nil

Agency	Amount
Water Safety Ireland	€31,519.98
Charities Regulator	Nil
Western Development Commission	€307.25

Question No. 423 answered with Question No. 422.

Departmental Expenditure

424. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the amount her Department and all associated agencies have spent on public relations consultancy costs since January 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32653/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The table below details information on amount spent by my Department (my Department incurred no costs) and the agencies under its aegis on public relations consultancy costs since January 2021:

Western Development Commission	WDC has spent €3,515.27 on public relations consultancy costs since January 2021. This includes costs related to the launch of WesternJobs.ie.
Charities Regulator	The cost so far this year is €12,000 ex. VAT. This was paid to Murray Consultants, our external agency. Murray's were selected from an OGP framework after a thorough tender process. Murray's provides the Charities Regulator occasional public relations services.

Climate Action Plan

425. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the current and capital costs involved with each action item in the Interim Climate Action Plan under her Department's responsibility. [32701/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Climate Action Plan 2019, the Interim Climate Action Plan from earlier this year and Climate Action Plan 2021, when it is complete, are more than spending programmes. They include regulatory and taxation measures and aim to mobilise private investment. It would be difficult, and indeed misleading, to identify their Exchequer cost.

The Climate Action Plan sets out, for the first time, how Ireland can reach its 2030 targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and also put Ireland on the right trajectory towards net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. The step-up in ambition in each of the sectors covered by the Plan will require investment across the entire economy. Overall, through the mix of technologies and measures identified, the Plan sets out the pathway that represents the least-cost burden to the economy as a whole. A significant portion of the technologies and measures set out in the Plan will result also in net lifetime cost savings to the economy as a whole.

In terms of costs to the Exchequer and other public funding, the Plan will be funded through Project Ireland 2040 which provides €30 billion for low carbon and sustainable mobility investments in the period to 2027.

Many of the actions in the plan do not require public funding. The actions contained in this plan fall broadly into four categories:

- public funding provided in the annual estimates process and in Project Ireland 2040

- measures such as setting a long-term trajectory for the carbon tax, in order to change long-term behaviour and decisions to encourage investment in more sustainable choices
- new regulations to end certain practices (e.g. phasing out oil and gas boilers in homes or introducing low emission zones in cities)
- actions to promote public and community engagement and participation in reducing our emissions.

For the first time, a decarbonisation target has been set for each sector. Each Government Department must now determine the optimum approach to utilising the funding available to it to support the policies necessary to meet the targets proposed for each sector. The exact costs will be determined from the detailed policy design work which will consist of a mix of regulations, taxes, and subsidies which the Government may choose to deploy to achieve the target abatement range in each sector.

It should also be noted that there would also be a very significant cost to the Exchequer for not implementing any policies to achieve compliance with our 2030 targets, which would also lock Ireland into a high carbon trajectory that would be unsustainable in the long-run.

The NDP Review process is underway to update capital allocations for all Government Departments to 2030 and that, as per the phase one report of the NDP review that has already been published (<https://assets.gov.ie/130139/c3a7eeab-83c3-4e54-9b33-6ff7e89b99a2.pdf#page=null>), the NDP Review will be consistent with recent and upcoming commitments from the Irish Government to become carbon neutral by 2050 and to meet the more immediate climate targets by 2030.

Equality Issues

426. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the way in which her Department and agencies under her remit are working towards enabling access to employment for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities, including, but not limited to, persons with disabilities, persons from ethnic minorities, Travellers, Mincéirí; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32745/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department and the agencies under its remit provide a number of supports which contribute towards enabling access to employment for persons from minority and or disadvantaged communities. These include the following:

SICAP

The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) is Ireland's primary social inclusion funding intervention. SICAP 2018 – 2022 aims to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion and equality by supporting disadvantaged communities and individuals.

Under SICAP, funding is provided to Local Development Companies to allow them to carry out work locally to help disadvantaged individuals and the groups that represent those individuals. The programme is managed by the Local Community Development Committee (LCDCs) in each Local Authority area.

SICAP has 2 programme goals. Goal one is supporting communities, which involves supporting local community groups representing disadvantaged communities and target groups so

that they can work towards solving social exclusion issues that affect them. Goal two involves supporting individuals who have been identified as being in need to improve their life chances. This can be through lifelong learning and training, getting labour market supports to improve work readiness, or working with people in broader and more holistic ways so that they can improve their quality of life and general well-being.

SICAP 2018-2022 continues to prioritise supports to those who are most marginalised and disproportionately affected by poverty. The following 13 target groups are engaged with under the Programme: Disadvantaged Children and Families; Disadvantaged Young People (aged 15 – 24); Disadvantaged Women; Lone Parents; Low Income Workers/Households; New Communities; People living in Disadvantaged Communities; People with Disabilities; Travellers; Roma; The Unemployed; The Disengaged from the Labour Market (Economically Inactive); Emerging needs category as selected by the LCDC.

In 2020 SICAP helped 26,178 people and they received in excess of 108,000 supports. Of this, 43% were from a jobless household, 27% were long-term unemployed, and 17% were under 25 and 9% were people with a disability. 6,067 people completed a lifelong learning course. 1,057 people got jobs and 1,274 set up their own business. 2,687 community groups were helped & they received in excess of 19,000 supports. 448 Social enterprises were also supported through SICAP.

Community Services Programme (CSP)

The Community Services Programme (CSP) currently supports more than 420 community organisations to provide local social, economic and environmental services through a social enterprise model. CSP funding is provided as a fixed annual contribution of €32,000 towards the cost of a manager and €19,033 towards an agreed number of full-time equivalent positions.

The programme focuses on communities where public and private sector services are lacking, either through geographical or social isolation or because of demand deficits. It supports a range of community business and social enterprises, including Local Development Companies, to deliver a diverse range of local services and employment opportunities.

CSP supported organisations must employ at least 70% of their CSP supported full time equivalents (FTEs), from across the following target groups, who are deemed most distant from the labour market, which include persons with a disability, members of the Traveller community, those most distant from the labour market, unemployed people, stabilised and recovering drug misusers and people with convictions who are in contact with the probation service.

Libraries Development

The public library service provides the Work Matters programme which promotes the library as a space to support the information and research needs of people who are seeking employment, changing career or wishing to up-skill.

Social Enterprise

Social enterprises operate in a wide range of areas including health care, environment and housing. Work Integration Social Enterprises (WISEs), support disadvantaged people to prepare for, and participate in, the labour market. The continued implementation of the National Social Enterprise Policy for Ireland will support the development of social enterprises including those providing valuable services to disadvantaged communities.

Our Rural Future

My Department's mission is "To promote rural and community development and to support vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland".

A key element of this mission are the inclusive communities. A key component of delivering on this mission is regular, ongoing and meaningful engagement with rural and community development stakeholders working to enhance the quality of life in our communities.

'*Our Rural Future - Rural Development Policy 2021-2025*' was published on 29 March 2021 and is the most ambitious and transformational policy for rural development in Ireland for decades.

The policy focuses on optimising opportunities for individuals, communities and businesses and promotes inclusivity and social cohesion, placing people and communities at the heart of the measures for delivery. It contains more than 150 commitments, across the whole-of-Government, each of which is aligned to at least one UN Sustainable Development Goal. Some of these commitments specifically support minority cohorts in rural areas, including measures geared towards access to employment, such as investment in digital connectivity and remote working infrastructure, further education and training/upskilling, each led by the relevant Government Department.

Our Rural Future was developed after an extensive consultation process and, as a result, it recognises the key needs of people living and working in rural areas.

My Department will continue to engage with and listen to communities as we implement the Policy over the next five years as ongoing consultation will play a key role allowing us to maximise the impact of *Our Rural Future* and to develop additional measures for inclusion in the Policy.

The Department and its Agencies

The Department of Rural and Community Development was established on 19th July 2017 to provide a renewed and consolidated focus on rural and community development in Ireland.

Open recruitment for my Department is done through the Public Appointments Service (PAS) who have their own independent Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy that they adhere to. This is in line with the Government's own recently launched Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Vision Statement and Maturity Model for the Public Service.

The EDI Vision Statement and Maturity Model's aim is to "promote equality, diversity and inclusion". It is important that the Public Service achieves greater equality of opportunity, gender balance, diversity and inclusion across its workforce. It is also important that a consistent approach is taken, in line with equality legislation, to ensure that the Public Service is generally representative of society and respects and promotes human rights.

My Department has a Disability Liaison Officer (DLO) in place whose role is to assist and support staff with disabilities under the guidance of the National Disability Authority. This would include onboarding of new staff that require reasonable accommodation in their workplace. The DLO also plays an important role in promoting awareness about disability across the department and would support staff with disabilities when they are seeking job new opportunities and promotions.

Please note, the recruitment for the four agencies is a matter for the relevant boards and management of those agencies as they are independent entities.