

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].

Question No. 1 answered orally.

Departmental Funding

2. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount of Exchequer funding spent on afforestation investment for the years 2016 to 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38489/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The current Forestry Programme (2014-2020), operated by the Department commenced in 2015 and offers an ambitious and attractive set of forestry measures aimed at increasing timber production and continuing to provide up to 12,000 jobs in the forestry sector while at the same time improving the quality of the natural environment.

The Department provides generous grants to landowners who wish to plant forestry through the Afforestation Grant and Premium Scheme. The Scheme provides 100% of establishment grants with annual premiums for up to 15 years, depending on the species chosen.

A wide variety of schemes are specifically focused on the establishment and management of forests that deliver significant biodiversity benefits. The Native Woodland Establishment Scheme supports the planting of new native woodland and the Native Woodland Conservation Scheme aims to conserve existing native woodland and help to convert conifer stands to native woodland at key locations.

The Exchequer spending on afforestation in the years 2016 to 2021 to date amounts to approx €486m. This includes payments for new planting in those years and payment of premiums for planting in previous years. The area of newly established forestry in the years 2016 to 2020 amounts to 22,045 hectares.

It is Government policy and has been for successive decades to increase forest cover in Ireland, to bring it into line with European norms. We have been very successful in increasing cover from 1% at the turn of the century to 11% currently and this would not have been achieved without State investment. We are still some way from our objective of 18% cover and, undoubtedly, State investment will continue to be needed to achieve this.

We are currently developing a new Forest Strategy under Project Woodland which will inform the content of the new Forestry Programme. All interested parties will have an opportunity to have a say in how and what and where we should plant under a public consultation process later this year and I encourage engagement with this process.

Details of payments for afforestation in each of the individual years 2016 to 2021 to date will be provided separately to the Deputy.

Questions Nos. 3 and 4 answered orally.

Agriculture Schemes

5. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider increasing the amounts paid under the sheep welfare scheme from €10 per ewe to €30 per ewe financed from a combination of national co-financing and CAP Pillar II funds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38678/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am very conscious of the important role that the sheep sector plays in the continued growth and development of our agri-food sector, and its valuable contribution to the rural economy. I fully support the sheep sector.

The strong performance of the sector in 2020 has continued into 2021. Reductions in production globally and increased demand are expected to support continued strong performance throughout 2021. The current average price is €6.17 per kg, which is 21% above the same period last year.

The Sheep Welfare Scheme was introduced in December 2016 as part of Ireland’s Rural Development Programme, having been agreed with the European Commission. In the four years of the scheme to date, €66.9 million has been paid to 18,268 farmers. The Sheep Welfare scheme has been extended in 2021 as part of the transition arrangements prior to the next CAP.

With regard to the new CAP, as you are aware, at the end of June there was general agreement on the CAP Reform proposals by Agriculture Ministers. However, we are still some time away from the final legal texts.

The Department is working closely with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to provide indicative funding for co-financing of the rural development aspects of the CAP Strategic Plan (CSP). I expect to be in a position in the coming weeks to bring a Memo on the matter to Government, and then to launch a public consultation on the draft interventions proposed for the CSP. I will also be engaging in extensive discussions with stakeholders throughout the summer to hear their views. I will continue to consult on the content of the plan with the key stakeholders, through the Stakeholder Consultative Committee. The Deputy should note that full details of the development of the CSP to date, including consultation documentation, is available on gov.ie. As part of CSP preparations, officials have been examining options to build on the existing Sheep Welfare scheme. However, it is important to note that any such scheme must operate on the basis of specific actions to enhance animal health and welfare being carried out, with funding on the basis of costs incurred and income foregone, as is the case with the current scheme.

I can assure the Deputy that I am committed to supporting the sustainable development of the sheep sector.

Questions Nos. 6 to 10, inclusive, answered orally.

Agriculture Industry

11. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of engagement with representatives of the beef industry. [38491/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department and I engage extensively on an ongoing basis with all the key stakeholders in the beef sector. This may take place in stakeholder forums related to specific topics, for example, the draft 2030 Strategy, Brexit or CAP. Additionally, there are a number of sector specific forums through which my Department and I engage with specific sectors. Currently, the main specific engagement with the beef sector facilitated by the Department is the Beef Taskforce.

The Beef Taskforce was established on foot of the beef sector agreement of 15th September 2019. The Beef Taskforce's remit as set out in terms of reference was to monitor the implementation of the actions arising from that agreement. The Taskforce was to meet at least quarterly from October 2019 for a period of one year after which the Taskforce's progress was to be reviewed. However, progress was delayed in 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As the Deputy may be aware, I have requested the independent Chair of the Beef Taskforce, Mr Michael Dowling, to provide a report to me on the progress to date of the Taskforce. It is my understanding that the majority of the actions are now implemented, but I await the final report, after which I will make the necessary decision on future strategic engagement with the sector.

All documents from the Beef Taskforce meetings, including minutes and updated progress reports, are published on the gov.ie website.

Effective strategic engagement across the beef sector is crucial to its development in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable way, that works for all actors in the supply chain.

The Deputy can be assured that I will continue to support constructive strategic engagement within the sector, as well as measures aimed at strengthening the supply chain, including support for Producer Organisations, and interventions aimed at supporting both economic and environmental efficiency for beef farmers in the future.

Question No. 12 answered orally.

Forestry Sector

13. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the progress of Project Woodland. [38547/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Project Woodland was launched in February this year with the objective of reviewing and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the forestry licensing system, as well as the creation of a shared national vision for forestry and the development of a new Forest Strategy. It involves four Working Groups (WG) covering various aspects of forestry delivery and reports to a Project Board.

I am pleased to say that substantial work has been undertaken by all Working Groups, with regular meetings held. The Project Board overseeing the project is actively engaged having had eight meetings to date. They intend to produce interim reports to update all interested stakeholders on the progress on implementation of the project, the first of which will be published in the next fortnight.

As I mentioned, there are four WGs examining the suite of recommendations made in the MacKinnon report. Among their key recommendations to the Project Board to date are:

- examining the backlog and producing specific recommendations for improving output, including a definition of the backlog, which have been presented to the Project Board for consideration.

- licensing process improvement. A business analyst has commenced work on an end-to-end process review. In addition, proposals for a pre-application process and a planning grant have been submitted to the Project Board for their consideration.

- a regulatory review of the licensing system be carried out. I have agreed with this proposal and have asked the Project Board on how best we will do this. It will be undertaken by independent expert. The review will include an examination of experiences in other Member States in licensing forestry activities and how they comply with EU legislation and from this what lessons we can bring to our licensing systems.

- putting forward proposals for a review of the organisational structure of forestry within my Department, and reviewing the roles Coillte, Coford and Teagasc in terms of supporting the Department on delivering forestry outcomes.

- developing a template for a new Customer Charter for forestry, which will be finalised in tandem with the work on the licensing process.

- Training of all actors within the sector and ways in which to positively communicate with customers and all stakeholders will be looked at in detail by two sub-working groups.

- developing a shared vision for forestry in Ireland and aims to deliver a new Forest Strategy in middle of 2022. On this, a preliminary analysis has been completed which includes a detailed SWOT analysis, stakeholder mapping development of proposed scenarios. This work and other work to take place will inform the next steps which will include a wider public and stakeholder engagement process and I expect this to take place later this year.

In conclusion, I would like to recognise the momentum and progress made under Project Woodland and I applaud the commitment shown by all involved, in particular the representatives from the Forestry Policy Group who make up the membership of the Working Groups. Along with Minister of State Pippa Hackett who has overall responsibility for the sector, I am committed to the success of this Project and by working together I believe we can deliver on its ambitions for the benefit of the forestry sector and society at large.

In parallel with Project Woodland, the Department continues to pursue continual improvement on all its work on forestry particularly licensing. I am pleased to say that is yielding dividends and that licensing is 30% ahead of the same point last year. There is still considerably more work to do but we are fully committed to maintaining this momentum.

Questions Nos. 14 to 16, inclusive, answered orally.

Horse Racing Industry

17. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he is satisfied that the current structure of the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board is sufficiently independent to ensure maximum confidence that any allegations concerning doping, animal welfare abuses or other illegitimate activities are adequately investigated. [38523/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Since 1st January 2018, the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board (IHRB) is the regulatory body for all horseracing in Ireland. The IHRB is a company limited by guarantee set up by the Turf Club and the Irish National Hunt Steeplechase Committee for the purpose of carrying out the regulatory and licensing functions for Irish horseracing.

This body is responsible for protecting the integrity and reputation of Irish horseracing in Ireland.

The Irish Horseracing Industry Act 1994, (as amended) provides for the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board (IHRB) to have the following functions

- to regulate horseracing;
- to make and enforce the Rules of Racing and in so doing to promote integrity and fair play in horseracing;
- to provide adequate integrity services for horseracing, and
- to license racecourses under the Rules of Racing.

The Horse Racing Ireland Act, 2016 provides that Horse Racing Ireland is responsible for the overall administration, governance, development and promotion of the Irish horse racing industry and for guaranteeing funding to the Racing Regulatory Body to carry out its functions through an integrity services budget which is agreed annually.

Under Section 12 of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act 2001, financial support is provided by the State to Horse Racing Ireland (HRI) on an annual basis. In the 2021 budget, €76.8m was allocated to HRI. HRI have informed the Department that some €10.3m is being provided to the IHRB for Integrity Services in 2021 and is based on an agreed annual budget.

To place the integrity system operated by the IHRB in context:

- The drugs testing systems in Irish racing are similar to those that apply in other major racing countries.

- For 2021, the annual budget for drug testing and doping control will be circa €2.4m and over 4,300 horses will be tested. A total of 72% will be associated with races on track and 28% will be out of competition or be tested at point to points.

- For the first time in 2021, there is testing at sales and breeding establishments.

- Unannounced hair testing (which gives a more detailed record of substances to which a horse is exposed) was introduced in July 2020 with 77 different horses tested, all yielding negative results.

- Recently, the Department granted Authorised Officer status to IHRB officials which will see cross-industry cooperation on anti-doping in Ireland.

- A total of €500,000 is being provided by HRI to the IHRB as part of its Integrity Services funding this year for the installation of CCTV in all racecourse stable yards with a view of having each of the 25 racecourses in Ireland covered by the beginning of the 2022 racing season.

I am satisfied the current structure of the IHRB is sufficiently independent to ensure maximum confidence that any allegations concerning doping, animal welfare abuses or other illegitimate activities are adequately investigated and will be followed up, where necessary.

Forestry Sector

18. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the planned timeline to complete and publish an external review of the forestry licensing process. [38155/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): When Minister of State Hackett and I launched Project Woodland in February of this year, I had two objectives. One to address and review the forestry licensing system and secondly to develop a shared national consensus on forestry and woodland creation long-term in Ireland.

I am pleased to say that the Working Groups who are addressing these key issues are now well established and working very well. The Project Board which oversees their work is very actively engaged also, having had eight meetings already. They will shortly publish an interim report on their work to date regarding the recommendations that have been made to them from Project Woodland.

The review of the licensing process is a top priority and I see it as having two elements. The first involves the process from forestry application to forestry licence, taking account of the Department's operating procedures and IT processes along the way. An independent business systems analyst is currently conducting this review, and has a plan in place to finalise it by end August, at which stage it will be brought to the Project Board for consideration.

The second element of the review is a more high-level review of the regulatory and planning process for forestry licensing in Ireland. I am anxious that this gets underway as soon as possible. The Project Board will advise me on how best to secure the independent person or persons with appropriate legal and environmental expertise to carry it out. It is intended that it include an examination of experiences in other Member States in licensing forestry activities and how they comply with EU legislation and from this what lessons we can bring to our licensing systems. Given the importance of this analysis, we will have to accord enough time for this review to be comprehensive in nature.

These two comprehensive reviews of the end-to-end licensing process and the regulatory framework will, I believe, lead to lasting improvements in the efficiency and effectiveness of the system and will help us better meet the needs of landowners, forest owners, timber producers and all involved in forestry in Ireland.

Forestry Sector

19. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the recommendations contained within the report of the Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture, Food and the Marine on Issues impacting the Forestry Sector in Ireland relating to ash dieback that he will implement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38176/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The relevant recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee relating to ash dieback disease are Recommendations 6 and 7. While I have already responded to the Committee, it is my intention to respond in more detail to the Committee on these recommendations and to implement those aspects identified as relevant and critical to the overall national ash dieback policy and support response.

Recommendation 6 of the Joint Oireachtas Committee's report highlights a number of im-

portant areas including research reporting on engagement with the Reconstitution and Underplanting Scheme (RUS) and related financial supports.

Since 2013, the Department has supported a number of important research initiatives including research into spore trapping and field trials and laboratory research in relation to the identification of ash dieback tolerance in the population and breeding of ash dieback tolerant plants.

In relation to engagement by ash plantation owners with the RUS scheme, the Department maintains close and on-going overview of the number of applications received and processed together with the related areas involved. To date, the Department has received over 330 RUS applications for a total of 1,364ha and approved 83 applications for a total of 280ha which demonstrates a healthy interest in the Scheme.

RUS provides financial support for the to the removal of the affected ash crop and replacement with alternative species. However, it is not a compensatory tool to provide payment for financial loss incurred due to the impact of ash dieback disease.

The Department is in the process of preparing a detailed report on Ash Dieback in Ireland. This report will include an account of the history, first findings and possible origins and spread of ash die back disease in Ireland. It will include an account of the legislative requirements and controls as well as the trade in ash and describe the Department's policy and support scheme response as the disease has progressed and knowledge and understanding have been gained and lessons learnt.

Trade Agreements

20. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he has conducted a socio-economic impact assessment on the effects of the British-Australian trade agreement on Irish agriculture. [38717/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): As Minister, I am continually aware of the global trade dynamic and its potential impact on Irish agriculture. My key focus, at all times, is the protection and enhancement of the incomes of our farmers, fishers and food producers.

On 16th June, the UK and Australian Governments announced they had reached a political agreement on their future trading relationship. Based on announcements made, it appears that the Agreement provides for full tariff-free access to the UK market at the end of 15 years for certain sensitive products, particularly beef and lamb, from Australia. Given the importance of the UK market to the agriculture sector, this is of course a matter of concern. However, the full extent of the implications of the agreement for Irish agriculture will depend on the specific detail in the final agreed text, which has not yet been published.

The Department, in response to Brexit, has further intensified its focus on market diversification for Irish agri-food exports. Since 2017, new or improved market access to several third countries has been gained. Despite this welcome development, the UK will remain a key market for Irish agri-food. Encouragingly, Bord Bia research has shown that British consumers have a high regard for Irish agri-food, and Bord Bia is continuing its intensive marketing in the UK.

In addition, the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement ensures continued quota-free and tariff-free access for Irish agri-food exports to the UK market. Irish agri-food goods also continue to benefit from market access to other third countries through EU Free Trade Agree-

ments. Finally, Ireland as a Member State has full unimpeded access to the EU Single Market of 450 million people.

Fishing Industry

21. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a new control plan has yet been submitted to the EU that would allow fish to be weighed at the factory rather than the quayside; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37164/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): As the Deputy will be aware, the strict legal position in relation to the revocation of Ireland's control plan is that the monitoring and control of fishing vessels within Ireland's Exclusive Fisheries Zone are matters for the Irish control authorities. Under the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act, 2006, all operational issues of this nature are exclusively for the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) and the Naval Service. I am expressly precluded from getting involved in operational matters such as this.

In the context of an Administrative Inquiry conducted under Article 102(2) of the 2009 EU Fisheries Control Regulation, Ireland was notified in April 2021 of a Commission Implementing Decision revoking the approval of the Irish control plan submitted for the weighing of fishery products.

The SFPA has advised me that following a public consultation on a revised Control Plan for submission to the EU Commission, the Authority has decided that the plan will cover all landings, including bulk pelagic landings. The Authority advise that it is prioritising the development of this revised plan to ensure that it addresses the specific risks that have already been identified and led to the Commission's decision to revoke the previous plan and provides enhanced controls in that regard. The SFPA has advised that this work is likely to take a number of months before a submission is made to the Commission.

Environmental Policy

22. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will immediately lift the restrictions on peat harvesting for 2021 to avoid a shortage of supply in 2021 which will result in job losses and business closures in the midlands and west; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38651/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In relation to peat extraction, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has no involvement in its regulation. This is a planning process under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and an Integrated Pollution Control (IPC) license process, under the remit of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

Following the publication of the review of the use of Peat Moss in the Horticultural Industry report, I am aware that Minister of State Malcolm Noonan proposed the establishment of a working group to include representatives from relevant Government Departments and State Agencies, Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations and industry stakeholders under an independent chairperson to examine the issues identified during the review. In this respect, the working group are addressing the key issues raised in the report itself, including future use of peat by the horticulture sector. The independent working group sent an interim report to Minister Noonan at the end of May for his consideration. Minister Noonan and his officials are

currently examining the report.

In addition to these developments, the Department is actively looking at alternatives to peat and has funded two research projects to date. It has also recently sought further research be conducted here to explore alternatives to peat based growing media for horticultural production in this area in its latest Research Call for 2021. These must be available, affordable and sustainable and meet quality as well as environmental requirements.

The Department also provides a support to the horticulture industry through the Scheme of Investment Aid for the Development of the Horticulture Sector. Financial support is available to assist growers and businesses through grant aid for capital investments in specialised plant and equipment including renewable energy, as well as technology adoption specific to commercial horticulture production. A 50% budget increase to €9 million has been secured for 2021 reflecting the importance of the sector. This Scheme is 100% funded by the Irish Government.

In addition, the Department administers the EU Producer Organisation Scheme for Fruit and Vegetables which allows growers jointly market their production in order to strengthen the position of producers in the marketplace.

Aquaculture Industry

23. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on introducing legislation to prohibit the granting of aquaculture licences within or adjacent to special areas of conservation and marine protected areas. [38151/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department considers all applications for aquaculture licences in accordance with the provisions of the 1997 Fisheries (Amendment) Act, the 1933 Foreshore Act and applicable National and EU legislation. The licensing process involves consultation with a wide range of scientific and technical advisors as well as various Statutory Consultees. The legislation also provides for a period of Public Consultation. In addition, the Department must adhere to a wide range of regulatory requirements and other legislation which impact on the licensing process.

The EU Habitats and Birds Directives have resulted in the designation of certain bays by the National Parks and Wildlife Services as ‘Special Areas of Conservation’ and/or ‘Special Protection Areas’ for birds. These are known as ‘Natura 2000’ sites and most aquaculture takes place within them, or adjacent to them.

A key component of the Aquaculture Licensing process is a series of measures designed to address the impact of aquaculture on the environment. This series of measures is known as “Appropriate Assessment”. All applications for aquaculture licences in Special Areas of Conservation and Special Protection Areas (Natura 2000 sites) are required to be appropriately assessed for the purpose of environmental compliance with the EU Birds and Habitats Directives.

The Appropriate Assessment process is managed in the main by the Marine Institute via environmental/scientific contractors commissioned by the Institute to carry out the necessary field work and desk analysis. To date, the Marine Institute has submitted Appropriate Assessments in respect of 35 bays to the Department.

My scientific and technical advisors, based on current scientific knowledge and best practice, have not recommended any blanket prohibition such as that envisaged in the Deputy’s question.

Common Agricultural Policy

24. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if mountain land, hill land particularly commonage will be treated the same in the next CAP for those farmers who farm this land and claim BPS, ANC and GLAS on this type of land; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38165/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Payments under the current CAP are based on the principle of the eligible hectare. An eligible hectare is required to draw down a BPS entitlement or an area based payment under the other schemes managed by the Department, such as GLAS and ANC.

An eligible hectare is an “agricultural area” with an “agricultural activity” being carried out on that area. In broad terms, this means that, for permanent grassland, it must be capable of supporting an agricultural activity such as grazing livestock and this activity must be carried out on an annual basis. Currently, no distinction is drawn between hill land and low land with regard to eligibility for payment.

Under the new CAP, the Department will, through the CAP Strategic Plan, be submitting to DG AGRI the new definitions for the eligible hectare that would apply from 2023 on. The definitions will build on the “eligible hectare” definition with a proposal from the Department to also allow up to 30% of the land parcel consist of features beneficial to the climate and environment such as scrub and habitat areas. Another element of the CAP agreement at the June Council includes a provision that it may be a requirement for an agricultural activity only every second year. The “eligible hectare” definition applies to all land with no distinction between hill land or low land.

Common Agricultural Policy

25. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the way in which he will ensure that the measures in the new Common Agricultural Policy will maximise delivery of greenhouse gas reductions across all farms in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37088/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I welcome the opportunity to update the house on the development of the CAP Strategic Plan and how it can contribute to the delivery of greenhouse gas reductions across all farms.

Department officials and I have been consulting and working closely with stakeholders, other government departments and agencies, and technical experts over the past year to ensure that the interventions proposed in the new CAP Strategic Plan plan will maximise greenhouse gas emissions, protect the environment, and enhance biodiversity and water quality.

In particular, the new eco-scheme will provide an opportunity for all farmers to participate. Other measures proposed include a National Agri-Environment Scheme, Suckler Carbon Efficiency Programme, Organic Farming Scheme, Protein Aid Scheme and on-farm investments supporting the achievement of environment targets. These will assist in meeting the targets outlined for a climate-neutral food system by 2050, by reducing biogenic methane levels, reducing ammonia emissions, reducing nutrient losses to water, prioritising biodiversity on farmed area and increasing the area of agricultural land farmed organically.

I will also shortly launch a public consultation on the draft interventions proposed and will

be engaging with stakeholders across the country to hear their views. I continue to engage with stakeholders, other Government Departments and State Agencies to design these interventions to ensure they give quantifiable benefits and contribute to achieving optimal greenhouse gas emission reductions across all farms.

Forestry Sector

26. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if measures are being taken to progress the wait list for felling licences to ensure that supplies of timber can be increased in the home market to ensure no further increases in timber products; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38719/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The situation with forestry licensing is a key priority for the Department, as well as for me and Minister of State Pippa Hackett who has responsibility for the sector. I fully understand the seriousness of the situation with many landowners in terms of the delays encountered and the various supply issues with the sector and Minister of State Hackett and I are engaging intensively with all parties to try to resolve the issues.

Many measures have been put in train to progress felling licences within the Department. Approximately 75% of homegrown roundwood that is processed by the sawmills in Ireland comes from Coillte forests and approximately 25% from private forests and it is therefore important that both Coillte and the private sector have sufficient licences to harvest and supply the sawmills. I can report that Coillte is fully licensed for this year.

In relation to the private sector supply we have increased substantially the number of felling licences in recent months due to several system improvements and continued investment in ecology resources. This resulted in June being the highest month for private felling licences in over 5 years.

To date this year (9th July), 1,836 forestry licences have issued – 1,164 tree felling; 308 afforestation and 364 forest road works licences. This represents 40% of the target of 4,500 licences to issue in 2021. The afforestation licences cover 2,695ha of potential new forestry. This is an increase of 21% on the area licensed to the same date in 2020 and a 5% increase in the number of afforestation licences issued.

Forest road works licence covering 151km of forest roads have issued to date. This far exceeds the Climate Action Plan target for 2021 of 125km of forest roads licensed.

The volume of tree felling licences issued has also increased substantially and is 77% ahead of the same point last year. A total volume of 3.594 million cubic metres has been licensed which is a very encouraging figure.

As part of Project Woodland we are examining all options. This includes an end to end review of our systems and processes to be carried out by an external systems analyst that has already started work on this review. In addition, a review of our legal and regulatory processes will be carried out. This review, to be carried out by an independent expert, will include an examination of experiences in other Member States in licensing forestry activities and how they comply with EU legislation. And from this what lessons we can bring in to our licensing systems.

It is of course essential that any regulatory changes fully comply with EU law.

I would also like to remind the Deputy that I and previous Ministers have brought in significant legislation in order to assist with the ongoing situation in the forestry sector. This includes SI 31 of 2020 that amongst other things allowed the Department to carry out Appropriate Assessments without the requirement of a Natura Impact Statement from the applicant. Also as you are aware SI 417 of 2020 and SI 418 of 2020 was signed into law and we brought in to primary legislation commencing the Forestry (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2020 to bring in a range of measures largely to allow for a more efficient running of the Forestry Appeals Committee and to bring our systems in line with the planning process.

Overall, we are making progress and I am hopeful that we can maintain this momentum.

Animal Welfare

27. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the measures he has taken to improve the welfare of animals during his first nine months in office; and the plans he has to build on these improvements over the lifetime of this Government. [37090/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): During my first nine months in office, a number of significant animal welfare related measures have been advanced and delivered upon.

In December 2020, I announced record funding of €3.2 million to animal welfare organisations - an increase of over 10% on 2019. The Programme for Government includes an undertaking to double our funding on animal welfare in line with policy priorities, and I am fully committed to this undertaking.

In February, I launched Ireland's first dedicated Animal Welfare Strategy 2021-2025. The Strategy is being backed by resources and expertise within the Department, and will involve dialogue and cooperation with other Government Departments and Agencies, with stakeholders and with civil society. Furthermore, I established a dedicated Animal Welfare Division within the Department earlier this year to drive the initiatives outlined in the strategy.

This strategy takes a 'One Health, One Welfare' approach, acknowledging and valuing the interconnections and inter-dependencies between human, animal and environmental health, and taking an evidence-led approach to policy making, target-setting, monitoring and evaluation.

The strategy sets out broad principles as to how we will improve animal welfare in Ireland over the coming years. It describes a framework for engagement and collaboration that will direct future activities - benefiting both animals and Irish society. A detailed action plan with specific, measurable indicators is being developed, and the Department will set up a High-Level Monitoring Group which will meet biannually to monitor and report on progress.

A number of initiatives identified in the strategy have been progressed. The draft general scheme of the Prohibition on Fur Farming 2021 legislation was approved by Government at its meeting on 18th June 2021.

The Control of Horses 1996 legislation is under review and the Department continues to support a number of urban horse projects nationwide, bringing education on all aspects of equine welfare to people in disadvantaged areas.

The first Chair of Animal Welfare & Veterinary Ethics at the UCD School of Veterinary Medicine has been appointed, supported by the Department, contributing to scientific leader-

ship at a national level.

The Farm Animal Welfare Advisory Council has been re-launched, and a new Advisory Council on Companion Animal Welfare has been established and will convene in the coming weeks.

There is a renewed emphasis on animal based indicators to assess welfare standards. For example, officials are developing indicators to help reduce the prevalence of tail docking in pigs while supporting the development of high welfare outdoor pig and poultry production systems. They are also working with Teagasc to mainstream the 'One Health, One Welfare' approach in all relevant research projects, training and education programmes.

The Department is conducting a review of identification and traceability systems with an equine census to be finalised by the end of this year and work has begun on a new system to improve greyhound traceability led by Rásaíocht Con Éireann.

Finally, on live exports, following a suite of new measures introduced in 2020-21, the Department continues to enhance the monitoring of welfare standards for all live animals exported.

Horticulture Sector

28. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the alternatives to horticultural peat identified by his Department; and his views on whether those alternatives will be sufficient to replace horticultural peat when current stock runs out in September 2021. [38018/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In relation to peat extraction, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has no involvement in its regulation. This is a planning process under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and an Integrated Pollution Control (IPC) license process, under the remit of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

Regarding the future use of peat moss in the horticulture sector and alternatives to peat, Malcolm Noonan T.D., Minister for Heritage and Electoral Reform in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, published a report on the review of the use of Peat Moss in the Horticultural Industry. After the publication of this report, Minister Noonan proposed the establishment of a working group to include representatives from relevant Government Departments and State Agencies, Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations and industry stakeholders under an independent chairperson to examine the issues identified during the review. In this respect, the working group will address the key issues raised in the report itself, including future use of peat by the horticulture sector and alternatives to peat. The independent working group sent an interim report to Minister Noonan at the end of May for his consideration. Minister Noonan and his officials are currently examining the report. The working group is now specifically reviewing alternatives to peat as part of a future report to Minister Noonan.

In addition, the Department is actively looking at alternatives to peat and has funded two research projects to date. It has also recently sought further research be conducted here to explore alternatives to peat based growing media for horticultural production in this area in its latest Research Call for 2021. These must be available, affordable and sustainable and meet quality as well as environmental requirements.

The Department also provides a support to the horticulture industry through the Scheme of Investment Aid for the Development of the Horticulture Sector. Financial support is available to

assist growers and businesses through grant aid for capital investments in specialised plant and equipment including renewable energy, as well as technology adoption specific to commercial horticulture production. A 50% budget increase to €9 million has been secured for 2021 reflecting the importance of the sector. This Scheme is 100% funded by the Irish Government.

In addition, the Department administers the EU Producer Organisation Scheme for Fruit and Vegetables which allows growers jointly market their production in order to strengthen the position of producers in the marketplace.

Agriculture Schemes

29. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to implement the new REAP scheme as the environmental scheme in the next CAP; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38164/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department is currently developing a new agri-environment climate measure for inclusion in Ireland's draft Strategic Plan required under the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) with, as stated in the Programme for Government, some elements being piloted in the transitional phase between the CAP programming periods.

The Results-based Environment-Agri Pilot (REAP) is the means by which those elements are being piloted, and it is currently proposed that the two actions in REAP will form part of the wider menu of options offered to farmers in the new agri-environment climate measure (AECM). REAP is an innovative and farmer-friendly pilot that will deliver an important income boost for farmers while also developing knowledge of results-based payments, and the way in which those payments may be maximised. It will help the Department, and indeed farmers and their advisors, to test some innovative actions and results-based scoring, with a view to including those actions in the next AECM.

The scheme is currently being implemented on the ground and the first of the scorecards are starting to be returned by advisors on behalf of scheme participants. I was delighted to see such strong interest in REAP with over 11,000 applications received. It shows that farmers are keen on this approach.

A key factor in the design is the increased environmental ambition required under the new CAP. The experience gained from the agri-environment climate measure in the Rural Development Plan 2014-2020, with the Green Low Carbon Agri-environment Scheme (GLAS), and the locally-led projects funded by the Department is informing the design process, as will the lessons learnt from REAP. The Department is also engaging with the CAP consultative committee, which comprises of a wide range of stakeholders, on elements of the Green Architecture.

My clear intention is to deliver an agri-environmental climate scheme that is ambitious in terms of rewarding farmers financially while protecting the environment and contributing to climate targets.

Forestry Sector

30. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of felling licences yet to be approved per county in tabular form; and the reason for the delay. [38494/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The delays in issuing forestry licences is a pressing one which is impacting the sector significantly. Along with Minister of State Pippa Hackett who has responsibility for the sector, we have devoted considerable efforts towards resolving it. The reasons for the current backlog are well known. The Department was obliged to make significant changes to the forestry licensing system due to European Court of Justice and Irish law rulings relating to the protection of European sites. This led directly to most forestry projects being screened in for Appropriate Assessment.

This has been very challenging to implement and resulted in a requirement for much greater ecological input into licensing and to a delay in issuing licences, while new procedures were introduced and additional IT, ecology and inspectorate resources were put in place. Significant resources and investment have been devoted to implementing these new procedures and I have introduced a framework under Project Woodland towards resolving the entire licensing issue.

There are 4,487 felling licences on hand, of which 1,764 are new Coillte applications received in March. I completely accept that this we need to address the number on hand, and the number of licences issued recently show that we are making some progress in this regard. Indeed, the number of private tree felling licences issued in June is the highest monthly figure for over five years. The Department has now issued 1,835 tree felling licences this year, 51% of which are to private individuals.

This reflects recent improvements made to the system for the systems for the preparation of Appropriate Assessment Screening Determinations, Appropriate Assessment Reports and Appropriate Assessment Determinations. Currently, these improvements are only applied to private tree felling licence applications and our ecologists are working mostly on these felling applications in advance of the system being developed further to assist with forest road works and afforestation licence applications.

Initiatives under Project Woodland will bring further improvements in licensing efficiency and output. There are recommendations with the Project Board, which oversees the Working Groups, for such initiatives, including proposals for a pre-application process and an environmental grant. A business system analyst is conducting a review of the licensing process. Furthermore, the Project Board Group has agreed that a regulatory review of the licensing system be carried out. and that an independent expert do this work.

We are making progress and I am hopeful that further gains in efficiency will be possible due to these proposals.

A breakdown by country of the felling licences on hand is provided below.

Counties	Felling Licences on hand
Carlow	80
Cavan	124
Clare	312
Cork	420
Donegal	239
Dublin	48
Galway	301
Kerry	286
Kildare	76
Kilkenny	165
Laois	172

Counties	Felling Licences on hand
Leitrim	153
Limerick	199
Longford	51
Louth	43
Mayo	206
Meath	89
Monaghan	34
Offaly	123
Roscommon	126
Sligo	131
Tipperary	418
Waterford	215
Westmeath	95
Wexford	129
Wicklow	252
Total	4,487

Aquaculture Industry

31. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on the granting of a licence for a salmon farm at Shot Head, Bantry Bay, County Cork. [38148/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Deputy should be aware that the decision to grant the aquaculture licence referred to was made on 29th June by the Aquaculture Licences Appeals Board (ALAB).

ALAB is an entirely independent Board and decisions in relation to the granting of an aquaculture licence in this instance are entirely a matter for ALAB. The decision of that Board and extensive documentation in support of the Board's determination has been published on the Aquaculture Licences Appeals Board's website (www.alab.ie). I would urge all interested parties to familiarise themselves with the detailed information publicly available on the website.

Given the independent status of ALAB and the fact that there is currently a three-month window from the date of the decision in which that decision can be judicially reviewed, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the Board's determination in this matter.

Environmental Policy

32. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on lifting the restrictions on horticultural peat harvesting for 2021 to avoid a shortage of supply for 2021 which will result in job losses and businesses closures in the regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37227/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In relation to peat extraction, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has no involvement in its regulation. This is a planning process under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and an Integrated Pollution Control (IPC) license process,

under the remit of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

Following the publication of the review of the use of Peat Moss in the Horticultural Industry report, I am aware that Minister of State Malcolm Noonan proposed the establishment of a working group to include representatives from relevant Government Departments and State Agencies, Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations and industry stakeholders under an independent chairperson to examine the issues identified during the review. In this respect, the working group are addressing the key issues raised in the report itself, including future use of peat by the horticulture sector. The independent working group sent an interim report to Minister Noonan at the end of May for his consideration. Minister Noonan and his officials are currently examining the report.

In addition to these developments, the Department is actively looking at alternatives to peat and has funded two research projects to date. It has also recently sought further research be conducted here to explore alternatives to peat based growing media for horticultural production in this area in its latest Research Call for 2021. These must be available, affordable and sustainable and meet quality as well as environmental requirements.

The Department also provides a support to the horticulture industry through the Scheme of Investment Aid for the Development of the Horticulture Sector. Financial support is available to assist growers and businesses through grant aid for capital investments in specialised plant and equipment including renewable energy, as well as technology adoption specific to commercial horticulture production. A 50% budget increase to €9 million has been secured for 2021 reflecting the importance of the sector. This Scheme is 100% funded by the Irish Government.

In addition, the Department administers the EU Producer Organisation Scheme for Fruit and Vegetables which allows growers jointly market their production in order to strengthen the position of producers in the marketplace.

Common Agricultural Policy

33. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps he is taking to ensure farm safety and farmer wellbeing is incorporated in the next Common Agricultural Policy; the status of the preparations by his Department in advance of the next CAP being implemented; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38565/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): As the Deputy will be aware, at the end of June there was general agreement on the CAP Reform proposals by Agriculture Ministers. The next CAP Strategic Plan is currently under development in the Department and it is through this that new schemes will be put in place. The SWOT (strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats) and Needs assessment process has been completed and Health and Safety has been identified as an area that requires further attention.

I am working very closely with my officials and my colleagues in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to provide indicative funding for co-financing of the rural development aspects of the next CAP plan. I will be engaging in extensive discussions with stakeholders throughout the summer to hear their views. I will also continue to consult widely on the content of the plan with the key stakeholders, through the Stakeholder Consultative Committee. The Deputy should note that full details of the development of the Cap Strategic Plan to date, including consultation documentation is available on my Department's section of the gov.ie website at gov.ie/cap.

Forestry Sector

34. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will report on the coverage of commercial forestry and the further plans to increase same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38602/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Forestry meets many societal needs and is a sector I fully support. It provides renewable timber products for both the export and domestic market, it is an important source of employment in rural Ireland, it contributes to our climate change and biodiversity objectives and affords people throughout the country a much appreciated outside space to enjoy. Productive forestry or commercial forestry is of course an important economic driver and is generally in Ireland considered to mean conifers particularly Sitka spruce. While broadleaves are important for biodiversity, conifers make up the bulk of timber that is processed through sawmills.

Harvested wood products are a key part of our climate policies in Ireland as they can serve to replace fossil fuel based products particularly in construction for example. These products will be derived from conifer plantations and highlight how our forestry policy must have a place for all types of trees.

The most up-to-date source of statistics in Ireland is Forest Statistics Ireland 2021 which Minister of State Hackett launched last month. It is from that report, informed by the National Forest Inventory, I can say that of the 770,000 hectares of forests in Ireland, some 71.2% are conifers and 28.8% are broadleaves.

There are substantial stands of commercial forestry due for harvesting in the coming years, The recent timber forecast predicts that the annual potential roundwood supply, will increase from 4.9 million in 2021 to 7.9 million cubic metres by 2035, followed by a small decrease to remain constant at circa 7.6 million cubic metres up to 2040.

While this is the case, it is our overall aim to increase forest cover in Ireland from 11% to 18%, and to achieve 8,000 hectares per annum. I am more than aware that we have been falling well short of this target in recent years, and while there may be many reasons for this, one contributory factor is undoubtedly delays in issuing licences. We are tackling the current backlog through the Project Woodland initiative and we have seen increases in the number of licences issued in recent months.

Looking to the future, the development of a new Forest Strategy is underway in Working Group 2, under Project Woodland. A public and stakeholder engagement process will take place later this year to inform the development of the new Forest Strategy and will also inform the next National Forestry Programme which is expected to come into effect from 2023. I encourage all those interested in the shape and content of forest policy in Ireland to engage with this public consultation process once it is initiated.

Common Agricultural Policy

35. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the measures he plans to include in the CAP Strategic Plan in order to redistribute funding to smaller farms and farms on marginalised and or designated lands; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38561/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The

aim of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is to all support farmers across the community to help them produce safe, nutritious and quality foods. The redistributive mechanisms currently in place under CAP Pillar I seek to create a more even payment landscape and target funds where they are needed most. These redistributive mechanisms are a core EU policy and are set to continue into the new CAP from 2023. The development of Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan (CSP) involves a number of stages, including SWOT analysis, needs assessment, intervention design, financial allocations, target setting and governance systems. The draft CSP will also be subject to an ex-ante evaluation, Strategic Environmental Assessment and Appropriate Assessment including a public consultation on the draft CSP and draft Environmental Report.

I continue to engage extensively with stakeholders on the future of CAP. Consultations on the development of the CSP will continue via the CAP Consultative Committee, which comprises representatives of the main stakeholders including farm bodies, NGOs, industry representatives and academia. This Committee has met on 18 occasions and further meetings are planned.

The Presidency Compromise package include a suite of measures which will enable us to ensure the fair implementation of redistribution measures such as capping, convergence and Complementary Redistribution of Income Support for Sustainability (CRISS). The agreement strikes the right balance between ensuring a fair distribution of payments between farmers and achieving a higher level of environmental and climate ambition. It also provides Member States with the flexibility required to implement the CAP in a way that best suits their national circumstances. Delivering flexibility was one of my key objectives from the outset and I am happy to have achieved this.

While agreement has been reached, further work remains on certain technical details of the proposed reforms. I expect to shortly bring a memo to government and launch a public consultation on the draft interventions proposed for the CAP Strategic Plan. I will also continue to engage with stakeholders as we develop our CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027.

Agriculture Industry

36. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine her views on supporting agri-food development in rural and regional Ireland as a building block to sustainable community development (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27886/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Deputy will be aware that the matter for which details have been supplied has been the subject of legal proceedings and, therefore, I do not propose to comment on that specific case.

However, I would like to outline the current and forthcoming actions and supports to ensure the continued development and prosperity of the agri-food sector in the decade ahead and supporting our rural and coastal economies.

The Irish agri-food sector is Ireland's oldest and largest indigenous industry. In 2020, the sector accounted for almost 7% of GNI and 9% of exports in value terms. It employs approximately 163,600 people, representing 7.1% of total employment. Outside of Dublin and the mid-east region, the sector provides between 10% and 14% of employment. Primary producers are at the heart of the agri-food system. Along with the other elements of the sector, including our dynamic and innovative food and drink industry, they make a vital contribution to sustainable community development.

A new ten-year Agri-Food Strategy to 2030, due to be published shortly, will out a strong vision for the sustainable development of the agri-food sector in the decade ahead. The development of the new Strategy is a key commitment of the Programme for Government and of the Government's rural development policy, "Our Rural Future 2021 to 2025".

I also recently 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.

In the context of the agri-food sector's contribution to rural and regional Ireland, it is also worth noting that the Department makes direct payments to Irish farmers of almost €1.9 billion annually, under CAP and national schemes. In addition, it funds research, advisory and training supports which directly benefit Irish farmers, and, along with the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, co-funds a number of preferential loan schemes to the benefit of primary producers. Farmers also benefit significantly from a range of agri-taxation measures, which are particularly focused to support land mobility and generational renewal.

Coillte Teoranta

37. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount of funding Coillte has been allocated for 2021 and 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38492/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Coillte is a private commercial company established under the Forestry Act 1988 which operates in forestry and related activities and does not receive funding from the Exchequer by way of subvention or grant-in-aid. It has not been allocated funding under the Department's estimate process for 2021, nor will it for 2022. The Forestry Act provides among other things, that a principal object of the company is to carry on the business of forestry and related activities on a commercial basis

Coillte's Annual Report illustrated a solid financial performance in 2020 with the company succeeding in keeping wood and wood products moving in a challenging year, doubling and tripling visitor number to forest sites due a renewed interest in the outdoors and reforestation over 9,000 hectares.

While we do not fund Coillte, they may apply under certain Department funded schemes from time to time, in accordance with EU State-Aid rules. These include grants for afforestation and for approved applications under forestry support schemes aiming at improving the resilience and environmental value of forest ecosystems, such as the Native Woodland Conservation and the Woodland Improvement Schemes.

Furthermore, under the Coillte Nature initiative to create native woodlands and restore habitats in order to enhance ecosystem services, my Department intends to fund a pilot scheme for the establishment of native woodlands on cutaway industrial bogs. Coillte are currently partnering with Bord na Mona on this project and we expect to receive an application for this work in the very near future.

I also believe that Coillte can play a role in other afforestation initiatives under the Government's ambitions plans for climate action. I have asked them to consider what role they could play and to come forward with ideas for increasing new afforestation and I expect to hear from them soon on this.

Agriculture Industry

38. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which he foresees the continued viability for the agri-food business notwithstanding the meeting of carbon reduction targets; his proposals for mutual coexistence of one with the other; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38179/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The continued viability and sustainability of the agri-food sector is compatible with the requirement that the sector must contribute to our national climate targets.

The need to improve sustainability in all its forms – economic, environmental and social - has been at the core of the deliberations of the Stakeholder Committee established to develop a new 10-year Strategy for the agri-food sector. The Deputy will be aware that a draft of this Strategy was published in April as part of a public consultation.

That draft set a vision for Ireland to become a world leader in Sustainable Food Systems over the period to 2030. By pursuing this vision, the Strategy aims for Ireland to continue producing safe, nutritious, high-value food, while protecting and enhancing our environment and contributing to vibrant rural and coastal communities and the national economy.

It is clear from the draft Strategy that careful consideration has been given to the issue of meeting environmental targets, while also supporting the ongoing development and viability of the agri-food sector. The draft Strategy has established four high level Missions and these will guide the sector to achieving the triple objectives of economic, environmental and social sustainability.

Those Missions are:

- A Climate Smart, Environmentally Sustainable Agri-Food Sector.
- Viable and Resilient Primary Producers, with Enhanced Wellbeing.
- Food that is Safe, Nutritious and Appealing, Trusted and Valued at Home and Abroad; and
- An Innovative, Competitive and Resilient Sector, Driven by Technology and Talent.

It is also worth noting that the draft Strategy has set challenging environmental metrics for the sector to achieve, including the over-arching ambition to develop a climate neutral sector by 2050, with substantial verifiable progress by 2030. I note that a series of well-thought out actions are contained in the Strategy to help deliver on that ambition.

These build on the Ag Climatise Climate & Air Roadmap for the Agriculture Sector that I launched in December last. I want to re-assure the Deputy that efforts are well under way to implement the 29 actions contained in that roadmap.

Environmental Policy

39. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to ensure that peatlands are harvested in such a way that they are in the best possible condition for a planned and structured restoration; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38653/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In

relation to peat extraction, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has no involvement in its regulation. This is a planning process under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and an Integrated Pollution Control (IPC) license process, under the remit of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

In relation to planned and structured restoration of peatlands, on 7th September 2020, Malcolm Noonan T.D., Minister for Heritage and Electoral Reform in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, published a report on the review of the use of Peat Moss in the Horticultural Industry. After the publication of this report, Minister Noonan established a working group that includes representatives from relevant Government Departments and State Agencies, Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations and industry stakeholders under an independent chairperson to examine the issues identified during the review. In this respect, the working group is addressing the key issues raised in the report itself, including the regeneration of the existing bogs for use in Paludiculture, Eco-Tourism, Carbon Farming, and Tree Farming as appropriate to optimise environmental outcomes.

Horticulture Sector

40. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps he will take to address the imminent crisis in the horticulture and mushroom sectors. [38522/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In relation to peat extraction, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has no involvement in its regulation. This is a planning process under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and an Integrated Pollution Control (IPC) license process, under the remit of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

Following the publication of the review of the use of Peat Moss in the Horticultural Industry report, Minister of State Malcolm Noonan proposed the establishment of a working group to include representatives from relevant Government Departments and State Agencies, Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations and industry stakeholders under an independent chairperson to examine the issues identified during the review. In this respect, the working group are addressing the key issues raised in the report itself, including future use of peat by the horticulture sector. The independent working group sent an interim report to Minister Noonan at the end of May for his consideration. Minister Noonan and his officials are currently examining the report.

In addition to these developments, my Department is actively looking at alternatives to peat and has funded two research projects to date. It has also recently sought further research be conducted here to explore alternatives to peat based growing media for horticultural production in this area in its latest Research Call for 2021. These must be available, affordable and sustainable and meet quality as well as environmental requirements.

The Department also provides a support to the horticulture industry through the Scheme of Investment Aid for the Development of the Horticulture Sector. Financial support is available to assist growers and businesses through grant aid for capital investments in specialised plant and equipment including renewable energy, as well as technology adoption specific to commercial horticulture production. A 50% budget increase to €9 million has been secured for 2021 reflecting the importance of the sector. This Scheme is 100% funded by the Irish Government.

In addition, the Department administers the EU Producer Organisation Scheme for Fruit and Vegetables which allows growers jointly market their production in order to strengthen the

position of producers in the marketplace.

Forestry Sector

41. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he has addressed the shortcomings in terms of resources in his Department to deal with ecologist's reports for tree felling licences in which there is a two year backlog in the application process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37228/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The situation with forestry licensing is a key priority for the Department, Minister McConalogue and for me. I fully understand the seriousness of the situation with many landowners in terms of the delays encountered and the various issues with the wider sector.

I can assure the Deputy that ecology resources have been put in place and we will continue to invest in ecology resources. We now have approximately 24 full time equivalent ecologists working on forestry files. While crucial, resources are not the only solution to this licensing issues.

As part of Project Woodland, we are examining all options. This includes an end-to-end review of our systems and processes to be carried out by an external systems analyst that has already started work on this review. In addition, there will be a review of our legal and regulatory processes. This review, to be carried out by an independent expert, will include an examination of experiences in other Member States in licensing forestry activities and how they comply with EU legislation without experiencing the same issues that we have experienced in Ireland.

It is of course essential that any regulatory changes fully comply with EU law.

While these initiatives are being developed, the Department continues to pursue continual improvement. We have recently reviewed the systems for the preparation of Appropriate Assessment Screening Determinations, Appropriate Assessment Reports and Appropriate Assessment Determinations. Improvements have been made to the system to optimise the time of the ecologists to concentrate on the ecology aspects of each application.

Currently, these improvements are only applied to private tree felling licence (TFL) applications, which has already yielded results with increased licences issued. The ecologists have been working mostly on these felling applications in advance of the system being developed further for other licensed activities. In the coming days the system will be rolled out for processing road files and the development of the system improvement to assist with processing afforestation files will commence over the next few weeks.

To date this year (9th July), 1,836 forestry licences have issued – 1,164 tree felling; 308 afforestation and 364 forest road works licences. This represents 40% of the target of 4,500 licences to issue in 2021. The afforestation licences cover 2,695ha of potential new forestry. This is an increase of 21% on the area licensed to the same date in 2020 and a 5% increase in the number of afforestation licences issued.

Forest road works licence covering 151km of forest roads have issued to date. This far exceeds the Climate Action Plan target for 2021 of 125km of forest roads licensed.

A total volume of 3.594 million cubic metres has been licensed, which is 71% of the total volume licensed in 2020.

In relation to the private sector supply, we have increased substantially the number of felling licences in recent months due to several system improvements and continued investment in ecology resources. June was the highest month for private felling licences in over five years.

I would also like to remind the Deputy that Minister McConalogue and I and previous Ministers have brought in significant legislation in order to assist with the ongoing situation in the forestry sector. This includes SI 31 of 2020 that, amongst other things, allowed the Department to carry out Appropriate Assessments without the requirement of a Natura Impact Statement from the applicant. Also as you are aware I signed SI 417 of 2020 and SI 418 of 2020 and commenced the Forestry (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2020 to bring in a range of measures largely to allow for a more efficient running of the Forestry Appeals Committee and to bring our systems in line with the planning process.

Research Funding

42. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the ongoing research projects being funded by his Department to address the challenges of climate change in the agricultural sector; the further assistance his Department plans to provide in progressing this research; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38548/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine provides significant funding for public good research through a range of both national and trans-national competitive mechanisms that is directed at building the evidence-base and providing solutions aimed at the adaptation and mitigation of climate change across the agriculture sector.

Since 2019, over €8 million has been committed to support nine ongoing national and four trans-national research projects to develop the necessary tools, technologies and practices to reduce and mitigate methane emissions from ruminant livestock and facilitate Irish agriculture's move to increased carbon removal and efficiency.

The Department will continue to provide financial support to these projects, pending successful periodic monitoring by my officials, for compliance with the provisions of the grant award contracts agreed with the various institutions that are undertaking the research. Among those provisions is a requirement to widely disseminate the findings of the research to all relevant stakeholders through a variety scientific and popular media outlets.

Looking forward, the Department will provide further assistance and grant awards through the national competitive research call launched in December 2020. A central theme of this Call was Climate with the objective to support climate-smart research to improve, integrate and develop novel agriculture systems which support national greenhouse gas (GHG) / ammonia adaptation and mitigation goals, including the production of food, bio-based fuels, products and services, healthy soil systems, water and air quality, ecology and biodiversity.

The results of this competitive call will be known later this year and it is likely that I will then be in a position to announce additional funding for new climate-related projects that will further build scientific capacity and capability for climate-science in agriculture. Of course, this competitively allocated funding is additional to the grant-in-aid allocations to Teagasc of €147m in 2021, much of which goes towards research and advisory activities related to climate sustainability.

It is crucial to continually stay abreast and ahead of the research in order to best secure our sector.

Horticulture Sector

43. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will introduce a fair and workable licensing system to allow for the phasing out of horticultural peat harvesting over a transition period to 2030 but ensuring that there is a secure supply of growing media during that period in order that the sustainable horticultural sector is not jeopardised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38652/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In relation to peat extraction, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has no involvement in its regulation. This is a planning process under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and an Integrated Pollution Control (IPC) license process, under the remit of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

Following the publication of the review of the use of Peat Moss in the Horticultural Industry report, I am aware that Minister of State Malcolm Noonan proposed the establishment of a working group to include representatives from relevant Government Departments and State Agencies, Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations and industry stakeholders under an independent chairperson to examine the issues identified during the review. In this respect, the working group are addressing the key issues raised in the report itself, including future use of peat by the horticulture sector. The independent working group sent an interim report to Minister Noonan at the end of May for his consideration. Minister Noonan and his officials are currently examining the report.

In addition to these developments, the Department is actively looking at alternatives to peat and has funded two research projects to date. It has also recently sought further research be conducted here to explore alternatives to peat based growing media for horticultural production in this area in its latest Research Call for 2021. These must be available, affordable and sustainable and meet quality as well as environmental requirements.

The Department also provides a support to the horticulture industry through the Scheme of Investment Aid for the Development of the Horticulture Sector. Financial support is available to assist growers and businesses through grant aid for capital investments in specialised plant and equipment including renewable energy, as well as technology adoption specific to commercial horticulture production. A 50% budget increase to €9 million has been secured for 2021 reflecting the importance of the sector. This Scheme is 100% funded by the Irish Government.

In addition, the Department administers the EU Producer Organisation Scheme for Fruit and Vegetables which allows growers jointly market their production in order to strengthen the position of producers in the marketplace.

Animal Welfare

44. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he plans to introduce stricter legislation to ensure high levels of horse welfare. [38183/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 provides a modern framework for applying standards in the area of animal health and welfare and replaced a number of enactments dating back over a century. The Department has primary policy responsibility for the welfare of all animals, including equines.

The Act places clear obligations on owners to look after animals under their care. Neglect of, or causing unnecessary suffering to, animals is not acceptable and the Department continues to enforce the law in this important area.

Prosecutions under the Act have been pursued following investigations by authorised officers of the Department, An Garda Síochána and authorised officers of the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Dublin Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. These officers investigate matters relating to animal cruelty and neglect and, where the evidence supports such action, a file prepared and the matter pursued through the Courts.

The Department works closely with these bodies and I would like to take this opportunity to thank all involved for their work in the field of animal welfare.

In summary, the current modern legislative framework provided by the Act is considered fit for purpose - in respect of horses as well as other animals. Similarly, enforcement of the existing legislation has been working satisfactorily, and is kept under review with a view to ongoing improvements as needed.

The Programme for Government specifically commits to the continued robust enforcement of the Act, and officials are committed to engaging positively with stakeholders including owners, keepers and community groups to educate, encourage and empower those responsible for animals to ensure their welfare, addressing issues before enforcement action is needed.

The Programme for Government also contains an undertaking to provide additional funding to support animal welfare in the coming years to which I am fully committed. In this regard, in December 2020, I announced record funding of €3.2 million to 101 animal welfare organisations throughout the country including those engaged in equine welfare.

Agriculture Schemes

45. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the incentives in place to encourage young persons to take up farming as a career; the enrolment trends for the respective agricultural colleges for the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38549/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The challenge of generational renewal is widely recognised both at national and EU level. I personally support young farmers and see the need for generational renewal. This is critical to ensure a bright future for the agri-food sector. The new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) has cited generational renewal as one of the nine key objectives reflecting the need to ensure a vibrant agricultural sector equipped with skilled and innovative young farmers to respond to societal demands for quality food and environmental public goods.

There are a number of supports currently available under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and these are complemented by a suite of national measures.

Under the current CAP, the National Reserve and the Young Farmers Scheme (YFS) provide financial support to young farmers during the crucial early years when setting up a farm enterprise, with payments of €110m benefitting over 8,000 farmers each year under the YFS. A further €35 million has been allocated since 2015 to young farmers under the National Reserve. Additionally, under the TAMS II Young Farmer Capital Investment Scheme, young farmers can avail of a 60% grant rate as compared to the standard rate of 40% with over €133m paid to over 5,000 farmers under the scheme.

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At national level, there is a suite of taxation measures, both to facilitate succession and to support establishment, worth some €200 million per annum. The Future Growth Loan Scheme has also provided a source of finance for young farmers.

Teagasc's education activities continue to focus on equipping young farmers with the necessary knowledge to build successful careers. Teagasc data shows that a cumulative 16,700 students have enrolled in their Agricultural Colleges from 2016-2020, with an average of just over 3,300 each year. For the current year, there has been a strong flow of applications, but the final enrolment position will not be clear until after the CAO offers are made in late August and early September

Supporting young farmers continues to be a priority and I will continue to actively engage on this issue.

Research Funding

46. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the way his Department can assist with funding opportunities to support research initiatives in the area of climate change and agriculture; if this will include initiatives in forestry and streamlining the felling licence process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38566/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine through its competitive research calls provides significant funding for a wide range of projects in the area of climate change. Climate change will have the potential for significant impacts on agriculture and forests. It is important that we continue to support research that improves resilience and explores pathways to climate neutrality. A changing climate will have impacts on trees species and crops as temperature rises and moisture deficits increase.

For example, my Department is currently funding a project called FITFORESTs which will examine the role of species selection in the establishment of new forests. This research will focus on key species in Irish forestry and will provide up to date information on the best provenances and seed origins adapted for future Irish climatic conditions. This project is being lead by Teagasc and my Department is providing funding of approximately €640,000. My Department also provides funding jointly with the Environmental Protection Agency on other research projects and one of particular relevance is the SEQUESTER project. This project is examining pathways towards carbon neutrality in 2050 across the land use sector, including forestry.

In relation to the other important question the Deputy raises on initiatives to help streamline the felling licensing system this is an area being closely examined by Project Woodland. Project Woodland, which was launched in February this year, has been set up with the objective of reviewing and improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the forestry licensing system. A business analyst has commenced work on an end-to-end process review. Project Woodland has also recommended that a regulatory review of the licensing system be carried out.

I have agreed to this proposal and have asked the Project Board to advise on how best to do this as quickly as possible. This review, to be carried out by an independent expert, will include an examination of experiences in other Member States in licensing forestry activities and how they comply with EU legislation and from this what lessons we can bring to our licensing systems.

Common Agricultural Policy

47. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the measures he plans to include in the CAP Strategic Plan in order to redistribute funding to smaller and poorer family farms. [38175/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The aim of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is to all support farmers across the community to continue to produce safe, sustainable and healthy food. The redistributive mechanisms currently in place under CAP Pillar I seek to create a more even payment landscape and target funds where they are needed most. These redistributive mechanisms are a core EU policy and are set to continue into the new CAP from 2023. The development of Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan (CSP) involves a number of stages, including SWOT analysis, needs assessment, intervention design, financial allocations, target setting and governance systems. The draft CSP will also be subject to an ex-ante evaluation, Strategic Environmental Assessment and Appropriate Assessment including a public consultation on the draft CSP and draft Environmental Report.

I have continued to engage extensively with stakeholders on the future of CAP. Consultations on the development of the CSP will continue via the CAP Consultative Committee, which comprises representatives of the main stakeholders including farm bodies, NGOs, industry representatives and academia. This Committee has met on 18 occasions and further meetings are planned.

The Presidency Compromise package include a suite of measures which will enable us to ensure the fair implementation of redistribution measures such as capping, convergence and Complementary Redistribution of Income Support for Sustainability (CRISS). I believe the agreement strikes the right balance between ensuring a fair distribution of payments between farmers and achieving a higher level of environmental and climate ambition. It also provides Member States with the flexibility required to implement the CAP in a way that best suits their national circumstances. This flexibility was one of my key objectives from the outset.

While agreement has been reached, further work remains on certain technical details of the proposed reforms. I expect to shortly bring a memo to government and launch a public consultation on the draft interventions proposed for the CAP Strategic Plan. I will also continue to engage with stakeholders as we develop our CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027.

Covid-19 Pandemic

48. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the measures his Department has taken to mitigate Covid-19 related delays to the services it provides to the public. [38315/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has been able to maintain its services with very few exceptions. This was possible for several reasons, the most important of which is that the Department supports the Agri-Food sector which, itself, is an essential service and had to continue as part of the country's food supply chain.

Business continuity has been always been important to the Department and all its Divisions are required to have an up to date Business Continuity Plan. The Department's staff are aware of the critical role they play in the sector and, in the context of the public health restrictions, showed great flexibility in adapting to new working environments. Approximately half of our

staff were required to work from their usual locations, such as laboratories, ports, harbours, farms and meat plants as well as some offices which provided access to specialised resources. Appropriate public health measures were put in place for these staff.

As a countrywide organisation, the Department already operated an extensive remote IT infrastructure and this was extended and enhanced to accommodate the move to remote working for the staff who could carry out their duties away from the office. The Department will be reviewing its experience in responding to the pandemic and will use this information to adapt and improve its business continuity planning.

While the work of the sector and the Department was largely able to continue, albeit sometimes in a restricted manner, without the huge impacts felt in other areas, we are aware that no one was unaffected. We acknowledge that our customers and staff are also people who experienced stress and loss and were affected by the health restrictions that were necessary throughout the pandemic. We must recognise also that staff in meat plants continued to work through significant COVID-19 outbreaks and participated in serial testing and Rapid Antigen Testing programmes, due to the very particular circumstances in which Covid-19 affected these environments and that they demonstrated great resilience and dedication in doing so.

Thus, there are no substantial COVID-19-related backlogs in DAFM's work, however there were a few very limited exceptions. These exceptions included the Food Dudes programme which had to be scaled back to include DEIS schools only, but which was adapted to provide packs of fruit and vegetables to DEIS school children in their homes while schools were closed. Food Dudes and Moo Crew returned to the classrooms after Easter 2021, with the resumption of the opening of schools. Food industry usage of the Prepared Consumer Food Centre, established and funded by my Department, was hampered due to Covid-19 restrictions in 2020. However, the PCF Centre did provide virtual advice sessions for the sector.

However, it is possible that the public health restrictions have resulted in indirect delays. For instance, restrictions in the construction industry may have affected farmers' structural improvement plans and consequently, delayed their application under the TAMS schemes. As a supportive measure, initially our on-farm inspections were deferred for a brief period. They quickly resumed in line with public health Guidelines, as the Department implemented a suite of new protocols to protect both Farmers and Departmental staff.

The Department was fortunate, as almost all schemes had developed online application systems. However, with Public Offices closed, we were unable to run our Nationwide clinics during the BPS application period, so we developed a new system of telephone/email supports to provide assistance to farmers that had utilised the clinics in previous years. These new measures ensured that applicants were able to lodge their applications on time.

The Department also availed of processing and administrative flexibilities provided by the EU due to COVID-19. This allowed the Department to make all Scheme payments on time and in line with previous years. From September to December 2020, the Department issued in excess of €1.7 billion to farmers which mirrors the performance of previous years.

In addition, the Department provided additional supports to the sector through a number of financial schemes, co-delivered with the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment and some sector-specific schemes including the Aid for Private Storage (APS) measure and the €50 million exchequer funded Beef Finisher payment provided in 2020.

The Department continues to monitor all areas and sectors under its remit to identify and address any difficulties that may have arisen due to the pandemic. However, the Department's main contribution to the country's recovery will be in ensuring that we continue to deliver our

existing services, uninterrupted and to a high standard while, at the same time, planning for a successful future of the agri-food sector. The effects of Brexit will require attention for some time yet, agreement has been reached on a new CAP which will involve implementing many practical changes. The Agri-Food Strategy to 2030 will be the roadmap to Ireland becoming a world leader in Sustainable Food Systems over the next decade.

These are all significant challenges but will form the basis for maintaining the recovery from the pandemic and providing our sectors with sustainable growth.

Common Agricultural Policy

49. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will outline the climate mitigation measures agreed under the recent CAP agreement. [38490/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The new CAP will have an increased focus on environmental matters. The agreement sets out a number of measures aimed at encouraging farmers to adopt climate and environment-friendly farming practices, including:

- Ring-fencing of 25% of Member States' direct payments envelopes for new eco-schemes under Pillar I. There are some flexibilities in place for Member States including a two-year learning period in 2023 and 2024 to minimise the risk of loss of unspent funds, and a 'Rebate' system which recognises Member States expenditure on climate, environmental and animal welfare objectives under Pillar II of the CAP.

- A new enhanced system of conditionality (cross compliance) will apply to all farmers in receipt of CAP payments. This system introduces a new standard for Good Agricultural and Environmental Conditions (GAEC II) for wetland and peatland protection. Conditionality will also incorporate most of the current "greening" requirements.

- 35% of Pillar II payments must be targeted at environmental actions.

The agreement also provides Member States with the flexibilities required to implement the CAP in a way that best suits their national circumstances. Achieving this flexibility was one of my key objectives. It can be used as effectively and as fairly as possible to ensure that our CAP Strategic Plan is designed in such a way that it secures a sustainable future for Irish agriculture on all levels - economic, environmental and social.

While political agreement has been reached, further work remains on certain technical details of the proposed reform. Legal texts will be prepared by the European Commission and are expected to be presented to the Council and the European Parliament in due course for formal agreement.

Animal Welfare

50. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps he is taking to improve equine welfare standards. [38616/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Responding to the Programme for Government as well as public and stakeholder consultations, I launched Ireland's first dedicated Animal Welfare Strategy earlier this year. Taking a 'One Health, One Welfare' approach, the strategy acknowledges and values the interconnections and

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interdependences between human, animal and environmental health, and equine welfare is central to the strategy. A dedicated Animal Welfare Division has been established to drive the initiatives outlined.

The Department takes a preventive approach to equine welfare challenges by developing facilities for urban horse populations and by supporting initiatives educating young people in the care and welfare of horses. This work is carried out in close collaboration with the Local Authorities across the country.

For example, the Department supports the DSPCA's equine castration and ID clinics and education programmes, and animal welfare organisations are helped provide summer projects for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who care for horses.

I am also committed to providing additional funding in support of animal welfare in the coming years. Last December, I awarded a record €3.2 million to 101 animal welfare organisations countrywide, many of which are engaged in equine welfare activities. The 2021 application process is underway, and eligible registered animal welfare charities are invited to apply before 23 July.

My Department has primary policy responsibility for the welfare of all animals, including equines underpinned by the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013 which provides a framework for applying standards in the area of animal health and welfare. The Act puts clear obligations on owners to look after animals under their care.

The Department continues to enforce the law in this important area, as do An Garda Síochána and authorised officers of the ISPCA and DSPCA.

Trade Promotion

51. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the measures he will take and his plans to develop new markets for Irish wool; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38324/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): As the Deputy is aware, one of the actions under the Programme for Government is to undertake a review of the potential demand in domestic and international markets for wool based products such as insulation and fertilisers. Following the allocation of €100,000 in Budget 2021 for this review, I initiated a public consultation process in early March 2021 to determine the terms of reference for such a review which included

- the identification of market opportunities domestically and internationally for wool based products;
- carrying out economic feasibility and cost benefit analysis on proposed market opportunities;
- determining mechanisms that could be used to support industry initiatives; and
- identification of potential research projects applicable to supporting the identified market opportunities.

I am pleased to be able to advise the Deputy that through the competitive public procurement procedure, the Request for Tenders (RFT) seeking service providers to carry out this major study was published on 8th July 2021. The closing date for submission of tenders is 9th

August 2021. The successful service provider will be contracted to carry out a feasibility study in accordance with the Terms of Reference detailed above and will be also required to examine and evaluate the proposals received during the public consultation and report on their findings.

The time frame for the completion of the review including the tendering process, consultation with the stakeholder group which I am currently establishing and publication of the final report is end of November 2021.

The recommendations from this review will help focus the development of a robust policy roadmap for the Irish wool industry.

Organic Farming

52. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he plans to reform the organic farming scheme to remove preference for larger holdings above smaller farms. [38544/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Organic Farming Scheme was reopened earlier this year to encourage farmers to make the transition to organic farming. This is part of the commitment under the Programme for Government which is the highest level of ambition ever for the Irish organic sector.

Successful applications will be determined by a ranking and selection process. Marks are awarded for each sector with the aim of increasing the area under organic production, while prioritising areas deemed to be in deficit.

The Ranking and Selection is targeted at areas in deficit as outlined in the Strategy for the Development of the sector, which are dairy, tillage and horticulture. The process also gives priority to young farmers and larger holdings to encourage their participation in the scheme. These will help bring more scale to the sector.

However, there is no barrier to any sector or farm size applying and, indeed, I made it clear at the time of reopening that I encouraged applications from all interested farmers.

I am confident that the funding which has been provided for the organic sector is sufficient to allow farmers from both small and large holdings and indeed other farming enterprises to gain entry into the scheme.

Departmental Schemes

53. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the packages that have been put in place to compensate landowners that had lands damaged or destroyed by the Shass mountain landslide, Drumkeeran, County Leitrim in June 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38325/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In response to this event in 2020, a Multi-Agency Group chaired by the Minister for Heritage, was established and it includes representatives of Leitrim County Council, Oireachtas, Farm Bodies, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Inland Fisheries, Department of Transport, Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and Universities.

On 24th May 2021, I clarified that force majeure would apply to farm payments in 2021

and that the Department would consider options for compensation of farmers affected by the landslide.

Fishing Industry

54. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the engagement with representatives of the fishing industry in the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38493/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I have had ongoing engagement with fishing industry representatives since I took office last year and have met them on a number of occasions both in advance of the conclusion of the EU/UK Trade and Co-operation Agreement and subsequent to its adoption.

In the recent period, an Taoiseach and I met with industry representatives on 21st June to discuss some of the current issues and challenges facing the sector. An Taoiseach and I both welcomed the positive engagement and open dialogue with industry and reassured industry representatives of this Government's commitment to pursuing every opportunity at EU level to increase the available quotas for our fishing fleet and address the inequitable burden sharing placed on Ireland in the quota transfers in the TCA.

I had a further meeting with the fisheries Producer Organisations and industry representatives on 23rd June.

I held five regional meetings beginning with the East Coast (Louth and Howth) on 6th May and travelling around the coast to the South East (Wicklow, Wexford and Waterford), South West (Cork and Kerry), West (Clare, Galway, Mayo and Sligo) and finishing in the North West (Donegal) on 14th May.

I found the meetings very valuable and productive and heard from individual fishers and processors, fisheries representative groups and public representatives including local Councilors, TDs and MEPs. I also heard from other members of coastal communities who are not directly involved in the seafood sector, whose businesses and communities are nonetheless related on the sector.

As easing of COVID-19 restrictions now allows for meeting groups of people, I am arranging visits to coastal communities in the coming period and look forward to being able to engage in person on the pierside. I visited Howth Fishery Harbour Centre and Greencastle last week and I will visit other communities around our coast in the coming weeks.

I will continue to work with industry and with our EU partners to identify opportunities for growth and build a sustainable future for the sector.

Agriculture Schemes

55. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if growers of ash forestry will be consulted the changes or amendments that are being introduced through the ash dieback scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38144/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Since the first finding of ash dieback disease in Ireland, the focus of the Department's approach to the

disease, and the support provided to ash plantation owners, has evolved as our understanding of the nature and scale of the disease has changed.

In March 2013, the Department introduced a Reconstitution Scheme (Chalara Ash Dieback) to restore plantations established under the afforestation scheme which had suffered from or which were associated with plants affected by the disease. Mandatory sanitation felling was a component of this approach in the Department's attempt to eradicate the disease and support ash plantation owners.

A review of the national policy on ash dieback disease which involved stakeholder consultation was initiated in 2018 as it was increasingly evident from experience and the latest scientific advice that eradication of Ash Dieback Disease was no longer feasible. The focus of the review was on the policy approach and associated support schemes to evaluate the continued relevance of the national response, and to ensure that the forest owner is provided with a broader range of silvicultural and management options. Following the completion of the review, the Department introduced the Reconstitution and Underplanting Scheme (RUS) in July 2020.

The scheme opened for applications in June 2020 and to date there have been over 330 applications with 83 approved to date, which demonstrates a healthy interest in the Scheme.

The Department will continue to keep ash dieback under close review but our focus is very much in implementation of the current scheme and engaging with the applicants to that scheme.

Departmental Reviews

56. Deputy Catherine Connolly asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine further to Parliamentary Question No. 58 of 20 May 2021, the status of the review of the potential demand in international markets for wool-based products; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38146/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): As the Deputy is aware, the Programme for Government contained a commitment to undertake a review of the potential demand in domestic and international markets for wool based products such as insulation and fertilisers. Following the allocation of €100,000 in Budget 2021 for this review, I initiated a public consultation process in early March 2021 to determine the terms of reference for such a review and to provide opportunity for submissions and comments from interested parties on the potential market opportunities for wool products on the domestic and international markets. Over 40 submissions were received on the potential market opportunities for wool products on the domestic and international markets.

The terms of reference for the review are as follows:

- the identification of market opportunities domestically and internationally for wool based products;
- carrying out economic feasibility and cost benefit analysis on proposed market opportunities;
- determining mechanisms that could be used to support industry initiatives; and
- identification of potential research projects applicable to supporting the identified market opportunities.

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I am pleased to advise the Deputy that through the competitive public procurement procedure, the Request for Tenders (RFT) seeking service providers to carry out this major study was published on 8th July 2021. The closing date for receipt of submissions is 9th August 2021. The successful service provider will be contracted to carry out a feasibility study in accordance with the Terms of Reference detailed above and will be also required to examine and evaluate the proposals received during the public consultation and produce a report on their findings.

The time frame for the completion of the review including the tendering process, consultation with the stakeholder group which I am currently establishing and publication of the final report is end of November 2021.

The recommendations from this review will help focus the development of a robust policy roadmap for the Irish wool industry.

Agriculture Schemes

57. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the Irish or EU supports or grants that are available to Irish beekeepers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38166/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I fully acknowledge the important contribution bees make to agriculture and biodiversity as both pollinators and honey producers. In this regard, the Department provides a range of supports and initiatives to encourage and assist beekeepers and the national beekeeping associations. The Department is also a partner in the All Ireland Pollinator Plan 2021 – 2025 and is a member of the All-Ireland Honeybee Strategy Steering Group.

The main financial support available to beekeepers is through the Scheme of Investment Aid for the Development of the Commercial Horticulture Sector, which includes support for beekeepers registered with the Department. It is a mechanism that can assist beekeepers invest in their apiaries and associated apiculture equipment for the future. The scheme is due to reopen for applications in October 2021. This Scheme is 100% funded by the Irish Government.

In addition, the Department also provides annual grants to Irish National Beekeepers associations to support members and branches to pursue the craft of beekeeping to the highest standards and to also inform the general public about the environmental role that bees play in maintaining Irish biodiversity and crop production.

Further support to the beekeeping sector in Ireland is provided through the National Apiculture Programme. This programme is co-funded by the Department and the EU and provides funding to carry out applied research for the Irish apiculture sector. The National Apiculture Programme was awarded to a suitable research institution to carry out research in the area. This research when concluded will be beneficial to many beekeepers in Ireland.

The Department has funded a number of studies under the Genetic Research Grant Aid Scheme looking at various aspects of honeybee species and specifically *apis mellifera mellifera*. In 2021, funding has been allocated for an innovative queen rearing project.

The Department also provides a bee health service, free of charge, facilitating the early detection of pests and pathogens which is key to maintaining healthy stock of bees in Ireland. This bee health service also operates the Sentinel Apiary Programme along with volunteer beekeepers throughout Ireland. The aim of the programme is to ensure the early detection of three exotic pests, Small Hive beetle (SHB), *Tropilaelaps* spp. and the Asian Hornet.

Agriculture Industry

58. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the actions he is taking to prohibit unfair trading practices in order to strengthen the position of primary producers in the agri-food sector. [38525/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am fully committed to delivering much-needed transparency in the supply chain.

The Deputy will be aware also that one of the key principles of the Directive on Unfair Trading Practices in Business-to-Business Relationships in the Agricultural and Food Supply Chain is to protect farmers, farmers' organisations and other weaker suppliers of agricultural and food products against stronger buyers, and to improve their position in the supply chain.

I signed Statutory Instrument No. 198 of 2021 transposing the UTP Directive into Irish law on 28th April 2021, Ireland being one of eight Member States to do so ahead of the EU deadline of 1st May 2021.

The new Regulations transpose the Directive directly and are a significant step in progressing towards a more even playing field for our agricultural producers. There are in total 16 Unfair Trading Practices included in the Regulations. The new legislation also provide for the establishment of an Enforcement Authority to deal with complaints against unfair trading practices. I have established the Enforcement Authority in my Department as an interim measure pending the finalisation of primary legislation to establish a new Office of National Food Ombudsman/ Regulator or equivalent Office. The Enforcement Authority has the power to investigate complaints from suppliers, including primary producers, carry out investigations on its own initiative and initiate legal proceedings for breaches of the UTPs.

Increasing transparency all along the food chain is something that I believe is very important to strengthen the position of primary producers. The Programme for Government commits that the new Office of the Food Ombudsman or equivalent will have a specific role in analysing and reporting on price and market data in Ireland, as well as enforcing the UTP Directive. I intend that the new Office will build on the work already done on market transparency, including the market transparency studies commissioned by my Department as part of the work of the Beef Taskforce, which have been completed and published on gov.ie.

I am currently ensuring that the primary legislation needed to establish the new Office of National Food Ombudsman or Regulator or equivalent is being prepared as a priority action. The public consultation for that legislation closed recently. The submissions received will assist in determining what additional functions or powers should be assigned to the new Office and if any further rules or UTPs should be introduced that would go beyond those already included in the current UTP Regulations. Once established, the new Office will, I believe, provide an important service to those in the agriculture and food supply chain.

Fuel Prices

59. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department has conducted a study on the impact of fuel prices or taxes on the agricultural sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38167/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): No specific study of fuel prices has been conducted by the Department of Agriculture, Food and

the Marine. However, the Department does monitor costs relating to the agriculture sector on an ongoing basis. Each month the Central Statistics Office (CSO) release the Wholesale Price Index, the Consumer Price Index and Agricultural Price Indices, which track changes in input costs and output returns in agriculture, including fuel and energy costs. The CSO also issue annual data for the agriculture sector in their release “Output, Input and Income in Agriculture”, which also includes data on energy and lubricants used in agriculture.

In relation to fuel tax, I am advised by my colleague the Minister for Finance that the main agriculture exposure to excise duty comes from the fuel inputs primarily through the use of Marked Gas Oil, which is currently subject to a rate of mineral oil tax (MOT) of 13.8 cent per litre and that this compares favourably to the current full rate of MOT for auto diesel used as a propellant of 51.5 cent per litre.

Farmers and agricultural contractors, who incur expenses in relation to farm diesel in the course of their trade of agricultural contracting, may claim an income tax or corporation tax deduction for those expenses, including any carbon tax charged in respect of the diesel. It is also important to note that when the carbon tax was increased in Budget 2012, provision was made for a double income tax relief for farmers to compensate for the increase. It is available to individuals and companies that carry on a trade of farming and are entitled to claim an income tax or corporation tax deduction in respect of farm diesel.

Agriculture Schemes

60. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the consideration he has given to current NHA areas to be included for basic payments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38720/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): NHA or National Heritage Areas are areas of special interest containing important wildlife habitats. These areas were designated by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS).

The Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) and related area-based schemes such as the Areas of Natural Constraint (ANC) and Greening are paid on eligible hectares in line with EU Regulations. An eligible hectare consists of an “agricultural area” upon which an “agricultural activity” is being carried out on that area.

In terms of “agricultural area” on parcels of permanent grassland, this means that the agricultural area must be capable of growing grass and capable of supporting an “agricultural activity” such as grazing livestock or mechanical activities such as topping.

Any BPS applicant with NHA land that meets the above definitions of the eligible hectare is free to declare these lands for payment purposes. However, where the NHA coincides with a non-agricultural area or an agricultural area that has no agricultural activity exercised on it, then it is not eligible for payment.

Where a farmer is in any doubt with regard to the eligibility of their lands, they should discuss this with an agricultural adviser. Officials from my Department, through the Farm Advisory Service (FAS), maintain a list of accredited advisers. This list is available on the Department website.

Agriculture Industry

61. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the alternative products being considered for use in sowing maize following the implementation of the EU Directive 2019/904; when these alternatives will be made available; the estimated cost of these alternatives; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38311/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Deputy may be aware that the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications recently signed into force, national regulations prohibiting the use of single use plastics as required under the provisions in EU Council Directive 2019/904.

I understand that the industry is developing alternative products for use in the sowing of maize that will comply with the new requirements set down by this EU Directive. As this is a commercial issue, I am not aware of the costs associated.

In terms of support for the sector, the Department re-commenced Value for Cultivation and Use (VCU) trials for uncovered maize, in 2020 as a means to identify varieties better suited to Irish growing conditions and which do not require plastic covering. This work will build on the 2015 'Uncovered Recommended List' in which a high performing variety was identified and which is currently available on the Irish market for growers.

Trade Promotion

62. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the terms of reference of the review of the potential demand in international markets for wool-based products have been finalised to-date; if so, if he will provide a copy of the finalised terms of reference; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38147/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): One of the actions under the Programme for Government is to undertake a review of the potential demand in domestic and international markets for wool based products such as insulation and fertilisers. Following the allocation of €100,000 in Budget 2021 for this review, I initiated a public consultation process in early March 2021 to determine the terms of reference for such a review.

Interested parties were invited to submit comments on the proposed Terms of Reference and/or submissions on the potential market opportunities for wool products on the domestic and international markets.

The proposed terms of reference were as follows:

- the identification of market opportunities domestically and internationally for wool based products;
- carrying out economic feasibility and cost benefit analysis on proposed market opportunities;
- determining mechanisms that could be used to support industry initiatives; and
- identification of potential research projects applicable to supporting the identified market opportunities.

The closing date for submissions was 2nd April 2021 and over 40 submissions were received. A wide range of proposals on the potential market for wool products were received. As there were no material changes proposed in relation to the terms of reference for the review,

they remain as detailed above.

I am pleased to advise the Deputy that the Request for Tenders (RFT) to carry out this major study was published on 8th July 2021. The closing date for receipt of submissions is 9th August 2021. The successful service provider will be contracted to carry out a feasibility study in accordance with the Terms of Reference detailed above and will be also required to examine and evaluate the proposals received under the public consultation process and produce a report on their findings.

The time frame for the completion of the review including the tendering process, consultation with the stakeholder group which I am currently establishing and publication of the final report is end of November 2021. The recommendations from this review will help focus the development of a robust policy roadmap for the Irish wool industry.

Common Agricultural Policy

63. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider restarting the internal convergence mechanism during the transition period for 2022 given the CAP Budget and a minimum convergence of 85% has been agreed. [38457/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Regulation regarding the transition period enables EU Member States to continue convergence during the transition period, if they so wish. In order to provide for stability, some certainty for farmers and consultation on CAP measures, Ireland chose to rest convergence during the transitional period (2021-22).

This rest period provided some time for consultation with farmers and their representative bodies on this important issue, along with some much-needed stability in direct payments through the transitional period.

It is my intention to consult with farm organisations for the second transition year of 2022 as well as for the next CAP programme to further consider how to continue the convergence process. This engagement will take place over the coming months in order to make a timely decision for the 2022 period and beyond.

The CAP regulations commencing in 2023 will continue with the convergence process to far beyond the original proposal, and I am committed to obtaining the best outcome for all Irish farmers from the options available.

Forestry Sector

64. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will support efforts to restore in part the oak plantation at Cratloe Woods, County Clare. [38182/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Cratloe Woods in Co Clare is owned and managed by Coillte and as such is its day-to-day management is an operational matter for the company. In view of the question raised, I have however made enquiries with Coillte on the matter.

They advise that the wood in Cratloe is approximately 356 hectares in size and, although it may have had a history of being once a large and vibrant oak woodland, the canopy cover for

oak today is around 5%. Coillte acknowledge the importance of the remaining stems of oak on the site and have put measures in place to retain and protect such veteran trees on their operational plans. They are also looking to enhance areas where strong indicators of oak woodland habitat are present and are currently reviewing same on their biodiversity plans for the area and area seeking public consultation for their five-year management plan.

An information note has been erected at Cratloe Forest which allows the public to engage with Coillte directly. I am advised that Coillte are open to discussing any aspect of their forest management at Cratloe Woods with the public or any other interested Community groups.

In accordance with the European Union Guidelines for State aid in the agricultural and forestry sectors and in rural areas 2014 to 2020, Coillte are eligible to receive grant aid from the Department for approved applications under forestry support schemes aiming at improving the resilience and environmental value of forest ecosystems, such as the Native Woodland Conservation Scheme and the NeighbourWood Scheme. If such an application is received and provided that it complies with our scheme conditions, the Department would provide funding in accordance with EU rules.

Agriculture Industry

65. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he plans to introduce measures to develop and expand the hemp sector in Ireland. [38157/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Programme for Government has committed to exploring the potential for the growing of fibre crops including hemp, to assess whether these crops have a viable market.

The Department has and continues to engage with stakeholders in the hemp sector on an ongoing basis. In the context, the Department is about to commence the consultative process by engaging with the relevant sectoral stakeholders including the representative bodies for the hemp sector.

As the Deputy may be aware, current legislation does not allow for the growing of hemp for fibre unless a specific licence has been granted by the Health Products Regulatory Authority. Following on from an earlier consultation carried out in 2018 with sectoral stakeholders, the consensus from those involved in regulation was that legislation governing the cultivation of hemp would remain under the auspices of the Department of Health.

This upcoming consultation process will concentrate on the potential for growing fibre crops and whether these crops such as Hemp have a viable market.

Forestry Sector

66. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider easing regulations around the granting of felling licenses in view of the shortage of supply and rising cost of timber; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38650/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The situation with forestry licensing is a key priority for the Department, for me and Minister of State Pippa Hackett who has responsibility for the sector. I fully understand the seriousness of the situation with many landowners in terms of the delays encountered and the various issues

with the wider sector.

Implementation of Project Woodland remains a key priority. I have already committed to commencing an end to end review of our systems and processes to be carried out by an external systems analyst that has already started work on this review. In addition there will be a review of our legal and regulatory processes. This review, to be carried out by an independent expert, will include an examination of experiences in other Member States in licensing forestry activities and how they comply with EU legislation without experiencing the same issues that we have experienced in Ireland. And from this what lessons we can bring in to our licensing systems.

It is of course essential that any regulatory changes fully comply with EU law.

While these initiatives are being developed, the Department continues to pursue continual improvement. We have recently reviewed the systems for the preparation of Appropriate Assessment Screening Determinations, Appropriate Assessment Reports and Appropriate Assessment Determinations. Improvements have been made to the system to optimise the time of the ecologists to concentrate on the ecology aspects of each application.

Currently, these improvements are only applied to private tree felling licence (TFL) applications, which has already yielded results with increased licences issued. The ecologists have been working mostly on these felling applications in advance of the system being developed further for other licensed activities. In the coming days the system will be rolled out for processing road files and the development of the system improvement to assist with processing afforestation files will commence over the next few weeks.

To date this year (9th July), 1,836 forestry licences have issued – 1,164 tree felling; 308 afforestation and 364 forest road works licences. This represents 40% of the target of 4,500 licences to issue in 2021. The afforestation licences cover 2,695ha of potential new forestry. This is an increase of 21% on the area licensed to the same date in 2020 and a 5% increase in the number of afforestation licences issued.

Forest road works licence covering 151km of forest roads have issued to date. This far exceeds the Climate Action Plan target for 2021 of 125km of forest roads licensed.

A total volume of 3.594 million cubic metres has been licenced, which is 71% of the total volume licensed in 2020.

In relation to the private sector supply, we have increased substantially the number of felling licences in recent months due to several system improvements and continued investment in ecology resources. This has already resulted in June being the highest month for private felling licences in over five years.

I also remind the Deputy that I and previous Ministers have brought in significant legislation in order to assist with the ongoing situation in the forestry sector. This includes SI 31 of 2020 that amongst other things allowed the Department to carry out Appropriate Assessments without the requirement of a Natura Impact Statement from the applicant. Also as you are aware, I signed SI 417 of 2020 and SI 418 of 2020 and commenced the Forestry (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2020 to bring in a range of measures largely to allow for a more efficient running of the Forestry Appeals Committee and to bring our systems in line with the planning process.

State Bodies

67. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the timeline for the development of the national food ombudsman; and when he expects the office to be established. [38524/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Deputy will be aware that the establishment of a National Food Ombudsman is a key commitment in the Programme for Government, which states that the new Office will enforce the Unfair Trading Practices (UTP) Directive. It will also have a role in analysing and reporting on price and market data in Ireland. The UTP Directive was required to be transposed into Irish law by 1st May 2021. Primary legislation is required to establish the new Office and to provide for functions that go beyond the powers laid down in the UTP Directive.

As a first step, the Deputy may be aware that, in April 2021, I signed Statutory Instrument No. 198 of 2021 to transpose the UTP Directive into Irish law directly as it stands, with effect from 1st July 2021. As an interim measure, I have established the UTP Enforcement Authority in my Department. That Enforcement Authority has the powers to investigate complaints from suppliers including primary producers, carry out investigations on its own initiative and initiate legal proceedings for breaches of the UTPs.

Secondly, with regard to the primary legislation being prepared for the new Office, in April, this year, I launched a public consultation inviting views on what functions the new Office should deliver, in addition to the UTP functions. The consultation closed in June and the submissions made are currently being analysed; any proposals made or issues raised will be considered in light of the primary legislation being drafted.

On 25th June, I hosted an information seminar which gave stakeholders an overview of the submissions made to the consultation and of the requirements of the UTP Regulations. The seminar also included a presentation by the former UK Groceries Code Adjudicator.

Once the primary legislation, which is now being drafted, is finalised and the new Office is established, it will incorporate the UTP Enforcement Authority.

I am fully committed to ensuring the Programme for Government commitment is implemented as quickly as possible. The Department is giving this matter priority. However, until the legislation is finalised, I am not in a position to say exactly when the new Office will be established.

Agriculture Industry

68. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans for the future of the Beef Market Taskforce; and the consideration he has given to extending the remit of the taskforce in order to secure a fair price for beef farmers. [38158/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Beef Taskforce was established on foot of the beef sector agreement of 15th September 2019. The Beef Taskforce's remit as set out in terms of reference was to monitor the implementation of the actions arising from that agreement. The Taskforce was to meet at least quarterly from October 2019 for a period of one year after which the Taskforce's progress was to be reviewed. However, progress was delayed in 2020 due to COVID-19.

As the Deputy is aware, I have requested the independent Chair of the Beef Taskforce, Mr Michael Dowling, to provide a report to me on the progress to date of the Taskforce. It is my understanding that the majority of the actions are now implemented but I await the final report,

after which I will make the necessary decision on future strategic engagement with the Sector.

The beef sector agreement contained 38 specific actions. Of these 38 actions, 30 were finite actions which had timelines attached for completion. The remaining eight are ongoing actions, which by their nature, are long term and will continue outside of the context of the Beef Taskforce. All documents from the Beef Taskforce meetings, including minutes and updated progress reports, are published on the Gov.ie website.

Effective strategic engagement across the beef sector is crucial to its development in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable way, that works for all actors in the supply chain.

As the Deputy will be aware, the determination of price for beef, or any other commodity, is a commercial matter in which neither I nor my Department, have any role. However, the Deputy can be assured that my Department and I will continue to support constructive strategic engagement within the sector, as well as measures aimed at strengthening the supply chain, including support for Producer Organisations, and interventions aimed at supporting productive and environmental efficiency for beef farmers in the future.

I am also progressing work to deliver a National Food Ombudsman. I am committed to delivering much-needed transparency to the sector and to our farmers.

Forestry Sector

69. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on the effectiveness of the reconstitution and underplanting scheme; the feedback received from foresters on the effectiveness of the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38019/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Since the first finding of ash dieback disease in Ireland, the focus of the Department's approach to the disease, and the support provided to ash plantation owners, has evolved as our understanding of the nature and scale of the disease has changed.

In March 2013, the Department introduced a Reconstitution Scheme (Chalara Ash Dieback) to restore plantations established under the afforestation scheme which had suffered from or which were associated with plants affected by the disease. Mandatory sanitation felling was a component of this approach in the Department's attempt to eradicate the disease and support ash plantation owners.

Over time, it became increasingly evident from experience gained, supported by scientific advice that eradication of Ash Dieback Disease was not feasible. The Reconstitution and Under-planting Scheme was developed in order to provide the forest owner with a broader range of silvicultural and management options in support of the ash dieback impacted plantation but without the requirement for mandatory sanitary action.

The scheme opened for applications in June 2020 and to date there have been over 330 applications with 83 approved to date, which demonstrates a healthy interest in the Scheme.

In terms of additional actions on ash die back disease, the Department continues to support research and continues to survey for the disease.

The future viability of ash is under very serious threat. Experience of ash dieback disease

observed in most European countries, is that it results in large scale tree mortality and threatens the existence of the ash trees all over the continent. The disease is now widespread in Ireland. However, approximately 1% - 3% of a given population of ash will be naturally tolerant to the disease and this tolerance is heritable. Because of this, through research and development efforts here in Ireland and internationally, we are establishing populations of tolerant material and it will be available over the medium and long term.

Part of the 2020 survey for ash dieback disease included a systematic survey of National Forest Inventory points across the country leading to further findings. By the end of 2020, there had been findings in ash in over 660 locations in various settings – forests, nurseries and garden centres, on farm planting, roadside planting, hedgerows and private gardens in all 26 counties.

Forestry Sector

70. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of efforts by his Department to combat ash dieback disease; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37231/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Since the first finding of ash dieback disease in Ireland, the focus of the Department's approach to the disease, and the support provided to ash plantation owners, has evolved as our understanding of the nature and scale of the disease has changed.

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In terms of additional actions on ash die back disease, the Department continues to support research and continues to survey for the disease.

The future viability of ash is under very serious threat. Experience of ash dieback disease observed in most European countries, is that it results in large scale tree mortality and threatens the existence of ash trees all over the continent. The disease is now widespread in Ireland. However, approximately 1% - 3% of a given population of ash will be naturally tolerant to the disease and this tolerance is heritable. Because of this, through research and development efforts here in Ireland and internationally, we are establishing populations of tolerant material and it will be available over the medium and long term.

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Organic Farming

71. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to reform the organic farming scheme to remove preference for larger holdings above smaller farms. [38615/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Organic Farming Scheme was reopened earlier this year to encourage farmers to make the transition to organic farming. This is part of my commitment and that of the Programme for Government which is the highest level of ambition ever for the Irish organic sector.

Successful applications will be determined by a ranking and selection process. Marks are awarded for each sector with the aim of increasing the area under organic production, while prioritising areas deemed to be in deficit.

The Ranking and Selection is targeted at areas in deficit as outlined in the Strategy for the Development of the sector, which are dairy, tillage and horticulture. The process also gives priority to young farmers and larger holdings to encourage their participation in the scheme. These will help bring more scale to the sector.

However, there is no barrier to any sector or farm size applying and, indeed, I made it clear at the time of reopening that I encouraged applications from all interested farmers.

I am confident that the funding which has been provided for the organic sector is sufficient to allow farmers from both small and large holdings and indeed other farming enterprises to gain entry into the scheme.

Common Agricultural Policy

72. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he plans to publish a discussion document in relation to the CAP 2023-2027 before the public consultation process begins; if so, when the document will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37165/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): As the Deputy will be aware, at the end of June political agreement was reached between the Council of Agriculture Ministers and the European Parliament on the reform of the Common Agricultural Policy.

However, we are still some months away from the final legal texts as the European Parliament must formally sign off, with a vote expected in September or October. The Commission will publish the legal framework thereafter.

I expect to be in a position in the coming weeks to bring a Memo to Government on the matter, following which I will launch a public consultation on the draft interventions proposed. I will also be engaging in extensive discussions with stakeholders throughout the summer to hear their views, including through the national CAP Stakeholder Consultative Committee.

The Deputy should note that full details of the development of the CSP to date, including consultation documentation, is available on the Department's section of the gov.ie website at gov.ie/cap.

This is a critical plan for farmers and rural Ireland as we seek to address the climate and

environmental challenges and support the viability and competitiveness of the sector and I want to ensure that all views are heard.

Forestry Sector

73. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the details of the independent regulatory review on forestry licensing announced recently by his Department. [37091/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): When Minister of State Pippa Hackett and I launched Project Woodland in February of this year, I had two objectives. One to address and review the forestry licensing system and the second was to agree a shared national view to long-term approach to forestry and woodland creation in Ireland.

I am pleased to say that the Working Groups under Project Woodland who are addressing these key issues are now well established and working very well. The Project Board which oversees their work is very actively engaged also having had eight meetings already and is shortly due to publish the first in a series of interim reports updating stakeholders on their work.

The review of the licensing process is a top priority and the regulatory review in particular is of key importance. This is a high-level review of the regulatory and planning process for forestry licensing in Ireland. I am anxious that this gets underway as soon as possible. Minister of State Hackett, who has overall responsibility for the sector, has asked the Project Board to examine how best we secure the services of an independent person or persons with appropriate legal and environmental expertise to carry it out.

It is intended that it include an examination of experiences in other Member States in licensing forestry activities and how they comply with EU legislation and from this what lessons we can bring to our licensing systems. Given the importance of this analysis, we will have to accord enough time for this review to be comprehensive in nature. I cannot at this stage say definitively when it will be completed but I would hope we would have a report in the Autumn.

Complementary to this review is the end-to-end process review of forestry licensing procedures and the IT system which is being conducted by an independent business analyst. There is a plan in place to finalise it by end August, at which stage it will then be examined by Working Group 4 and recommendations will be brought to the Project Board for consideration.

These two comprehensive reviews of the end-to-end licensing process and the regulatory framework will, I believe, lead to lasting improvements in the efficiency and effectiveness of the system and will help us better meet the needs of landowners, forest owners, timber producers and all involved in forestry in Ireland.

Agriculture Schemes

74. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide a support package for sheep farmers on animal welfare grounds. [38162/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am very conscious of the important role that the sheep sector plays in the continued growth and development of our agri-food sector, and its valuable contribution to the rural economy.

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The strong performance of the sector in 2020 has continued into 2021. Reductions in production globally and increased demand are expected to support continued strong performance throughout 2021. The current average price is €6.17 per kg, which is 21% above the same period last year.

The Sheep Welfare Scheme was introduced in December 2016 as part of Ireland's Rural Development Programme, having been agreed with the European Commission. In the four years of the scheme to date, €66.9 million has been paid to 18,268 farmers. The Sheep Welfare scheme has been extended in 2021 as part of the transition arrangements prior to the next CAP.

With regard to the new CAP, as you are aware, at the end of June there was general agreement on the CAP Reform proposals by Agriculture Ministers. However, we are still some months away from the final legal texts.

Meanwhile, the Department is working closely with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to provide indicative funding for co-financing of the rural development aspects of the CAP Strategic Plan (CSP). I expect to be in a position in the coming weeks to bring a Memo on the matter to Government, and then to launch a public consultation on the draft interventions proposed for the CSP.

I will also be engaging in extensive discussions with stakeholders throughout the summer to hear their views. I will continue to consult on the content of the plan with the key stakeholders, through the Stakeholder Consultative Committee. The Deputy should note that full details of the development of the CSP to date, including consultation documentation, is available on gov.ie.

As part of CSP preparations, officials have been examining options to build on the existing Sheep Welfare scheme. However, it is important to note that any such scheme must operate on the basis of specific actions to enhance animal health and welfare being carried out, with funding on the basis of costs incurred and income foregone, as is the case with the current scheme. Officials are also drafting an EcoScheme as provided for under Pillar One and it is likely that there will be a specific welfare aspect to this for any farmers, including sheep farmers, who choose to take up that option.

I can assure the Deputy that I am committed to supporting the sustainable development of the sheep sector.

Aquaculture Industry

75. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number and types of aquaculture licence applications approved by his Department in south-western areas of County Cork since 2017. [38150/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department considers all applications for aquaculture licences in accordance with the provisions of the 1997 Fisheries (Amendment) Act, the 1933 Foreshore Act and applicable National and EU Legislation. The licensing process involves consultation with a wide range of scientific and technical advisors as well as various Statutory Consultees. The legislation also provides for a period of public consultation.

In addition, the legislation governing aquaculture licensing provides for an appeals mechanism. Appeals against licence decisions are a matter for the Aquaculture Licences Appeals Board (ALAB) which is an independent statutory body.

Determinations in respect of aquaculture licence applications are published on the Department's website.

Department's records indicate that 51 applications for aquaculture licences have been granted since 2017 in the areas referred to by the Deputy. The specific information requested is set out in the table below:

Year	Marine Based Shellfish and Aquatic Plants	Landbased	Finfish
2017	6	-	-
2018	13	3	-
2019	26	-	-
2020	1	1	-
2021	1	-	-

Agriculture Schemes

76. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps he is taking to ensure that farmers who make trivial mistakes on online applications, such as failing to tick the ANC box when they wish to get paid for ANC, have an easy and transparent mechanism to have their mistakes rectified; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37229/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): All applications for Basic Payment Scheme and other EU funded Area Based Schemes are now completed online. The online application is mandatory under EU regulations and will continue under the new CAP. One of the many advantages of the online application process is the in-built checks which prevent certain errors being made.

Checks include the inability to claim incorrect parcel numbers, exceeding the maximum claimed areas of parcels and also errors of omission such as parcel use etc. These are highlighted with warning prompt boxes which must be completed and rectified before an applicant can proceed.

Following the application process, the Department facilitates preliminary checks of online Basic Payment Scheme applications for certain cases of non-compliance in the areas of over-claims, dual claims and overlaps. Applicants are notified via the online system of these errors and are offered the opportunity to rectify any such non-compliance with no penalty applied where the non-compliance is fully rectified within a prescribed date.

The purpose of the preliminary check is to enhance the correctness of BPS applications with the aim of lowering reductions and administrative penalties. These preliminary checks can also have the same impact on other area-based schemes.

Application for the Areas of Natural Constraints Scheme (ANC) is made annually by way of ticking the box to indicate that the applicant wishes to apply for the scheme when completing their annual online Basic Payment Scheme application form. This is done from the Applicant details screen, under the section entitled "Other Schemes and Activities", where applicants are advised to tick the box should they wish to apply for the ANC scheme.

The Department has taken a number of steps to ensure that farmers are reminded to apply for the Scheme where they have received payment in the previous Scheme year. Where such applicants have not ticked the box to apply for the scheme, they are provided with a prompt to

advise them that they had received payment under the Scheme in the previous year. They are then asked that, if they wish to apply in the current scheme year, they tick the box stating “I wish to apply for ANC”.

If they are no longer eligible to apply, or do not wish to apply, they are advised to tick the box stating “I do not want to apply for ANC”. It is not possible for these applicants to proceed with their BPS application until they have selected one of these two options.

The Department also produced a guide to the 2021 ANC scheme which issued to all eligible applicants and included an illustrated full colour guide with images to guide applicants through the process of applying for the ANC scheme online.

Applicants who do not tick the box to apply for the ANC scheme at the time of application, and subsequently wish to do so, are entitled to submit an appeal to the ANC section of the Department to request they be allowed to access the scheme on the grounds of Force Majeure/ Exceptional Circumstances. Applicants should set out the grounds of their appeal and provide any relevant supporting documentation. All appeals received will be reviewed and assessed on a case-by-case basis and provided with a written notification of the outcome of their appeal. Where an appeal is deemed to be unsuccessful by the Department, applicants are eligible to submit a further appeal to the independent Agriculture Appeals office.

Organic Farming

77. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the additional resources he is making available to support the development of organic farming in Ireland in view of the Irish target of 7.5% and the EU target of 25% of organic farmland by 2030; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37089/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): There is considerable growth in the organic sector in Ireland at present with the area of land under organic production now at approximately 74,000 hectares, an increase of nearly 50% since 2014. The current Programme for Government has set a new target for organic farming, to meet changing consumer trends in this area and has been a key priority of mine since becoming Minister.

This new commitment is to align Ireland’s organic land area with that of the current EU average of approximately 7.5% over the lifetime of this Government. This is the highest level of ambition ever set for the organic sector in Ireland and one which I fully intend to deliver. This will be delivered in a number of ways but principally through supports for the sector and closer integration of all links in the value chain from primary production right through to processing.

In 2018, the Department established the Organic Sector Strategy Group which was tasked with developing a National Organic Strategy for the development of the Organic Food Sector in Ireland for the period up to 2025. This strategy was published in January 2019. To assist the sector to realise its potential, an Organic Strategy implementation Group was established to monitor the implementation of the strategy. I believe its time that we review this strategy in light of the more ambitious targets for the sector.

Within the Organic Strategy, the lead role for the overarching cross sectoral action of market identification and activation is assigned to Bord Bia. Funding of €300,000 has been provided to Bord Bia for their Organic Marketing Plan in respect of 2021 and we are engaging with them on this. Developing new market outlets for our organic produce is essential if the sector is to develop.

I also recently announced the re-opening of the Organic Processing Investment Grant Scheme with an increased level of support of €1.2m for this year. Support is also provided under the Organic Capital Investment Scheme. Our main support is the Organic Farming Scheme to assist farmers converting and maintaining organic farming practices which I reopened this year after securing an additional €4m in the budget. I also intend to reopen this scheme again for 2022 subject to available funding.

Looking to the future, the Department is continuing to develop the CAP Strategic Plan in consultation with stakeholders through the CAP Consultative Committee and other forums. Consideration is currently being given to the measures that will be supported under the new CAP Strategic Plan which will include an enhanced support scheme for organic farming. These measures will ensure we have the tools to build on the success to date of the organic farming sector, which will assist in achieving our targets.

Organic Farming

78. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount of agricultural land in the State that was in organic production or conversion to organic production at the beginning of 2021; the amount in production or conversion to date; and the target output by the end of 2021. [38156/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The area of land under organic production at the beginning of 2021 was approximately 74,000 hectares, the vast majority of which has completed the in-conversion process. This is an increase of nearly 50% in the area of land under organic production since 2014.

A total of 317 applications were received under the 2021 Organic Farming Scheme. As the Basic Payment Scheme applications have not yet been finalised, the organic area of these applications is not yet available. Based on the average size of organic farms however, I believe there will be an additional 16,000 hectares brought into the Scheme in respect of these applications. This will equate to an increase of over 20% in the area of land farmed organically in 2021.

I will continue to progress the implementation of the National Organic Strategy 2019-2025 which sets out ambitious growth targets for the sector by aligning it closely with market opportunities. There is a strong correlation between this strategy and the EU Action Plan which is to increase consumer trust in organic food and to promote the conversion to and maintenance of organic farming methods.

The current Programme for Government has set a new target for organic farming, to meet changing consumer trends in this area. While the EU Commission's objective of reaching at least 25% of the EU's agricultural land under organic farming by 2030 is ambitious, there is a commitment to align Ireland's organic land area with that of the current EU average of approximately 7.5% over the lifetime of this Government. The Programme aims to focus on developing domestic and international organic markets, to ensure that farmers have access to premium-paying markets for their produce.

The Programme for Government also focuses particularly on maximising potential opportunities in the organic sector, the supply of quality Irish grains to an expanding food and drinks industry, and opportunities for home-grown proteins in animal feeds.

Horticulture Sector

79. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps his Department has taken to support the horticultural and mushroom sector in response to imminent crisis due to peat shortages; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38177/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In relation to peat extraction, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has no involvement in its regulation. This is a planning process under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and an Integrated Pollution Control (IPC) license process, under the remit of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

Following the publication of the review of the use of Peat Moss in the Horticultural Industry report, Minister Noonan proposed the establishment of a working group to include representatives from relevant Government Departments and State Agencies, Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations and industry stakeholders under an independent chairperson to examine the issues identified during the review. In this respect, the working group are addressing the key issues raised in the report itself, including future use of peat by the horticulture sector. The independent working group the working group sent an interim report to Minister Noonan at the end of May for his consideration. Minister Noonan and his officials are currently examining the report.

In addition to these developments, the Department is actively looking at alternatives to peat and has funded two research projects to date. It has also recently sought further research be conducted here to explore alternatives to peat based growing media for horticultural production in this area in its latest Research Call for 2021. These must be available, affordable and sustainable and meet quality as well as environmental requirements.

My Department also provides a support to the horticulture industry through the Scheme of Investment Aid for the Development of the Horticulture Sector. Financial support is available to assist growers and businesses through grant aid for capital investments in specialised plant and equipment including renewable energy, as well as technology adoption specific to commercial horticulture production. A 50% budget increase to €9 million has been secured for 2021 reflecting the importance of the sector. This Scheme is 100% funded by the Irish Government.

In addition, the Department administers the EU Producer Organisation Scheme for Fruit and Vegetables which allows growers jointly market their production in order to strengthen the position of producers in the marketplace.

Question No. 80 answered orally.

National Broadband Plan

81. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the details of her engagement with the National Broadband Plan in the past two months; and if she has confidence in the plan. [38495/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The National Broadband Plan (NBP) will bring reliable high-speed broadband to approximately 540,000 premises across the State, primarily in rural and isolated areas. These premises include homes, farms, community and health facilities, schools, and businesses.

The Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications has contracted National Broadband Ireland to deliver the NBP in areas where connectivity is not commercially viable and, as such, responsibility for the NBP is a matter for the Minister for the Environment, Cli-

mate and Communications.

Notwithstanding this, officials in my Department continue to work closely with their counterparts in the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications to deliver the Broadband Connection Point (BCP) initiative.

In that capacity my officials regularly meet with officials from the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications in order to ensure the orderly deployment of BCPs throughout rural Ireland.

BCPs are among the first deliverables under the NBP contract and are a vital service for communities within the NBP State intervention area. As of 6 July, 203 BCPs are live, with more to come on stream over the coming weeks. A full list can be found on the NBI's website: www.nbi.ie.

The National Broadband Plan will have a profound impact on the future of our country and will provide new opportunities for rural areas in particular. These include improved career opportunities for those living in rural areas, facilitating smart farming, allowing employers to access the pool of talent that resides outside our large towns and cities, and the provision of services such as eHealth and eLearning. The importance of the rollout of the National Broadband Plan is clearly recognised in the Government's new Rural Development Policy - Our Rural Future.

Questions Nos. 82 to 87, inclusive, answered orally.

Road Projects

88. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will provide clarity in relation to local improvement schemes particularly in areas that were formally within the boundary limits of Cork County Council which now find themselves within the boundaries of Cork City Council which are no longer entitled to funding. [38620/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Local Improvement Scheme, or LIS, is a programme for improvement works on small private or non-public roads in rural areas which are not under the normal maintenance of the Local Authorities. The scheme is funded by my Department and is administered through the Local Authorities. I launched the 2021 LIS on 14th May. I have also recently announced the allocation of an additional €10.5m for the scheme in 2021, bringing the total allocation to €21m.

Local Authorities in Dublin and the City Councils in Cork and Galway have not been eligible for funding under LIS. This is due to the nature of the scheme, which provides funding for improvement works on small private or non-public roads in rural areas and is typically linked to access to agricultural land. I have no plans at present to broaden access to the scheme to the City Councils.

However, I acknowledge that there were areas of Cork that were previously eligible under the Scheme but are not now eligible as a result of the recent boundary change. If both Local Authorities in the county were agreeable to including these areas affected by the boundary change as part of the scheme for Cork County, it is open to them to submit a joint proposal to my Department for consideration. I have indicated this previously.

Any such proposal would need to be made in the context of the existing allocation provided to the county, and without any additional funding requirement from my Department. Roads

selected for inclusion in the scheme would, of course, have to meet the criteria for the scheme.

Question No. 89 answered orally.

Community Development Projects

90. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the position regarding the activity of community group projects across the country; and her views on whether funding is distributed evenly across the country. [38666/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): A range of my Department's programmes provide funding to community group projects across the entire country. Each programme has a different focus and rationale which informs the allocation of funding. I will mention just a few examples here.

The **Community Enhancement Programme** provides grants to enhance facilities in disadvantaged areas and is administered by Local Community Development Committees in each Local Authority area. The funding is allocated to each Local Authority area using a methodology that takes population and deprivation levels into account.

The **Community Services Programme (CSP)** promotes social enterprise as an approach to alleviating disadvantage and addressing local social, economic and environmental needs which are not being met through public or private funding or other resources. It creates sustainable jobs for those most distant from the labour market, in particular for those who are long term unemployed and from specific target groups. 420 community organisations are currently supported nationwide under this programme.

The **Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)** provides supports to community groups, both in the form of grants and also providing non-monetary supports such as training courses and assistance with completing grant applications for funding. A total of 4,292 Local Community Groups (LCGs) have been supported by SICAP to date.

I am satisfied that community groups nationwide are benefiting positively from funding provided by my Department and I encourage them to continue to apply. Eligible groups can apply for all schemes subject to timeframes set out for each programme at gov.ie.

Questions Nos. 91 to 93, inclusive, answered orally.

Departmental Schemes

94. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the number of applications for the Connected Hubs Fund currently with her Department. [38488/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The increased shift to remote working as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has given us the opportunity for a greater regional distribution of jobs and to support a better quality of life for many people who previously spent many hours in long commutes. This is a key focus of the Government's new rural development policy Our Rural Future.

Remote working, supported by appropriate infrastructure and facilities, has the potential to encourage more people to live in rural areas while working in good quality jobs, no matter where their employer is based. Aside from the obvious benefits to remote workers themselves,

those that can work from a hub spend locally and will help revitalise our rural towns and their wider hinterlands.

On April 29th I launched the €5m Connected Hubs Call. This funding will benefit multiple projects and will support a wide range of relevant works nationwide, including the expansion of existing hubs, installation of privacy booths, access control and security systems, the conversion of existing open plan space to modular offices, and the provision of enhanced audio visual, networking and conferencing facilities. Grants will also fund measures to assist hubs to deal with COVID related challenges.

This investment will support the ongoing development of the recently launched National Hub Network – connectedhubs.ie, which already has 113 hubs using the platform and 380 hubs mapped. The supports delivered through this network will help build on the fantastic asset Ireland already has in its connected working ecosystem.

By the deadline of June 17th, my Department had received 152 applications in total. This represents a very high level of interest in my Department's call for proposals, and I expect to be in a position to announce details of successful applicants shortly.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

95. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the types of enterprises that may apply for the newly announced Covid-19 supports funding (details supplied) under the Our Rural Future - Rural Development Policy 2021-2025. [38323/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The €945,000 COVID-19 Social Enterprise Regeneration Programme is a Dormant Accounts Funded Programme exclusively for social enterprises that will assist them to re-purpose or diversify their trading income while adapting to the COVID-19 operating environment.

Social enterprises are businesses that work primarily to improve the lives of people. Their core objective is to achieve a social, societal, or environmental impact, and like other businesses, they pursue their objectives by trading in goods and services on an ongoing basis.

Surpluses generated by social enterprises are re-invested into achieving their core social objectives, and they contribute to a fair and inclusive sustainable recovery.

Throughout the pandemic, many social enterprises significantly stepped up and diversified their activities to adapt to local needs. Many that were required to close, continued to provide much needed support to their service users.

Through the COVID-19 Social Enterprise Regeneration Programme, twelve consortia of Local Development Companies, from every region in Ireland, will deliver training and mentoring programmes to an estimated 550 social enterprises that will build their capacity in areas such as strategic planning, digital innovation and governance.

The regional roll-out of the scheme is part of the commitment under Our Rural Future to deliver a suite of new measures to support the development of Social Enterprises in rural areas and to contribute to job creation locally.

This programme will complement mainstream business supports available to social enterprises, helping them to maximise their economic and social impact.

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Tidy Towns

96. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the number of applications for this year's tidy towns competition. [38486/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I was delighted to be in a position to launch the 2021 Supervalu TidyTowns competition on 21st May last. After the cancellation of the competition last year, I know that the launch of the 2021 competition was greeted with much relief and enthusiasm by the countless number of TidyTowns volunteers around the country.

Special arrangements have been put in place to ensure the return of the competition. The 2021 competition is taking place in the same format as previous years, albeit with a specific emphasis on electronic entry and remote adjudication of each town's entry. A second round of adjudications may be required in a small number of cases and, subject to ongoing public health advice, it may be possible to conduct these through an onsite inspection of the selected town or village.

The closing date for completed entries for this year's competition was 2nd July last. To date, my Department has received almost 800 entries for this year's competition and these have been recorded on the TidyTowns website. This is still a provisional figure as my officials continue to validate and register the entries received, and undertake final checks to ensure all entries have been recorded. The final list of all entrants will be provided on the TidyTowns website: www.tidytown.ie.

I am very pleased to see the large level of entries this year. The number of entries is testament to the resilience of the TidyTowns volunteers who have continued to undertake works in their towns and villages despite the challenges they faced. The competition will provide an important opportunity to recognise the significant role that these volunteers continue to play in their local communities.

Digital Hubs

97. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the progress in supporting the development of broadband connection points and the development of digital hubs in south-western areas of County Cork. [38171/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Broadband Connection Point (BCP) initiative is a key part of the National Broadband Plan and Our Rural Future. It is now in the latter stages of delivery and as of 6 July, 203 BCPs are live and in use, with the remaining sites in the process of being surveyed, installed or tested.

To date, 16 BCPs have been delivered in County Cork with a further 8 sites to be delivered over the coming weeks and months.

On 31 May, I launched the National Hub Network, connectedhubs.ie. Since the launch, 113 hubs have signed on and are now using the platform, with an additional 49 hubs in the process of being onboarded. Furthermore, the number of hubs identified through the Western Development Commission's hub discovery process has increased to 505. These are in the process of being verified before they are mapped online at www.connectedhubs.ie.

This website provides an interactive map of hubs which provides useful information in relation to each of the hubs and the services that are available at each site. At present, there are

approximately 20 hubs registered on the platform in County Cork, with more likely to be added in the future.

Since 2016 my Department has invested more than €50 million in the development of remote working facilities through the Town and Village Renewal Scheme and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund. I have also allocated €5 million to fund a Connected Hubs Call this year. This initiative will provide funding to support small scale capital works in existing hubs and Broadband Connection Points. Applications are currently being evaluated by my officials and I expect to shortly be in a position to announce the results of the evaluation process.

Charitable and Voluntary Organisations

98. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development her views on whether her Department's engagement with the charities it provides funding to aligns with human rights models; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38667/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): My Department is strongly committed to promoting equality, preventing discrimination and protecting the human rights of employees, customers, service users and everyone impacted by our policies and strategies, in recognition of the legal obligations conferred on it by section 42 of the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission Act, 2014.

The Scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNO) is a key element of my Department's support for the C&V sector, the development of a strong and vibrant civil society, and improving outcomes for those most disadvantaged. It provides multi-annual funding towards core costs of national, community and voluntary organisations delivering services and supports with a focus on one or more of the following: addressing poverty, social exclusion and promoting equality. The current scheme commenced on 1 July 2019 and runs to 30 June 2022. To date a total of €18.8 million has been allocated to 74 organisations.

The Scheme provides funding for two organisations who directly identify as human rights organisations (Free Legal Advice Centres and the Immigrant Council of Ireland) and four who reference human rights initiatives or goals as a key feature of their work (Community Action Network, Community Workers Ireland, the Irish Penal Reform Trust and Social Justice Ireland). The Scheme also provides funding for a number of other organisations, while not identifying directly as human rights organisations, whose advocacy and activities nevertheless play an important role in helping to strengthen integration and equality of access within our society.

My Department also provides funding to Rethink Ireland, which supports innovative non-profit organisations, charities and social enterprises who work for disadvantaged communities in the areas of Education, Health, Equality, Access to Employment and Green Transition.

The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme aims to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion and equality. During 2020, over 26,000 people and over 2,600 community groups received supports under SICAP. Funding of over €39m is being provided by my Department to 33 Local Community Development Committees in 2021 to support this work.

Departmental Funding

99. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the number of applications from each local authority for each funding stream operated by her De-

partment for 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [38487/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I have asked my Department officials overseeing different sources of funding for rural Ireland and communities to assemble this data in tabular form as requested by the Deputy. This will take some time given the level of applications received by my Department from all local authorities for the different funds available. I expect that the information requested will be provided to the Deputy within seven working days and it will also be published on the Departments web-site.

Questions Nos. 100 to 103, inclusive, answered orally.

Departmental Schemes

104. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if additional rural recreational officers will be employed; and if so, if it will be ensured they are allocated according to the work plans being operated by the local development companies. [38170/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Walks Scheme, which is funded by my Department, contracts landholders to undertake maintenance work on National Waymarked Ways and other priority trails that traverse their lands. The landholders receive modest payments for maintenance work undertaken in line with agreed work plans.

My Department commissioned an external review of the Walks Scheme to examine the delivery and strategic development of the Scheme, and assess the role and resourcing of the Rural Recreation Officer (RRO) posts throughout the country. The reviewers were also required to consider the level of funding provided to the Local Development Companies to deliver the scheme.

The final report was received by my Department this week and I expect to be in a position to publish the report after the contents have been fully considered. The recommendations contained in the review will inform decisions on the ongoing delivery and further strategic expansion of the scheme, including the resourcing of Local Development Companies and any additional Rural Recreation Officer positions.

Island Communities

105. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the upgrading of the helipad on Inishturk Island; the stage the upgrade is currently at; when it is likely to be completed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38555/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The construction of a new helipad referred to by the Deputy is a project being undertaken by Mayo County Council, with financial assistance from my Department.

My Department provided funding for the purchase of land for this project in late 2020. I have been informed that Mayo County Council are working to finalise a detailed design and to prepare tender documents for the helipad's construction at present. It is anticipated that tendering for this project will be undertaken in the near future.

My officials will continue to work closely with Mayo County Council to progress this im-

portant project.

Community Development Projects

106. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development his views on measures to support community projects as they reopen; and if that support will continue until the pandemic is declared over [38526/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): Given the role of my Department in supporting the economic and social development of rural Ireland, and community development throughout Ireland, many of our existing funding schemes support the response to, and recovery from, the pandemic in some way. However, a number of specific targeted measures are aimed at directly supporting the COVID response and recovery.

The main focus has been on community development supports with the increase in gross expenditure for that programme area, from €149.73 million in 2019 up to the €202.51 million in 2020, reflecting that.

My Department continues to provide COVID-19 supports to communities right across the country. On 6th May I launched the 2021 Stability Fund, with an allocation of €10 million, targeting organisations which deliver critical services to vulnerable people within their community but which now face closure or loss of service due to the impact of the pandemic. This €10 million investment builds on the €45 million Stability Fund 2020, which supported almost 600 organisations across the country.

The application process for the 2021 Stability Fund has now closed, with applications appraised and assessed in batches to facilitate timely drawdowns. Decisions will be released on an ongoing basis.

I was pleased to announce Tranche One of successful grantees under the 2021 Stability Fund on 9th July, supporting 180 organisations with close to €4.5 million in allocations. Further tranches will follow in due course.

The €4.5 million 2021 Community Enhancement Programme will also provide vital supports to assist local groups to re-open their facilities post COVID-19.

In addition, adjustments to programmes delivered by my Department, such as Town and Village Renewal and CLÁR, have been made, where required, to further support communities during the pandemic.

Community Development Projects

107. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if her Department has considered introducing a model of community wealth building similar to that implemented in Preston, England and North Ayrshire, Scotland to help develop rural areas. [38306/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department is progressing a number of national policies that provide, for both urban and rural areas nationwide, an integrated and strategic way of delivering supports, programmes and schemes, coordinating measures to address imbalances or lack of opportunity, making a real

difference to people's lives. These include the National Policy on Social Enterprise, and the Strategy to Support the Community & Voluntary Sector in Ireland. My Department has not deliberated on introducing the community wealth building systems approach to economic development.

The new national rural development policy *Our Rural Future*, sets out a blueprint for the development of rural Ireland over the next five years. The policy is supported by 150 commitments across Government, which will address the challenges facing communities and deliver new opportunities for people living in rural areas.

The policy recognises the importance of place-based development and will be underpinned by investment across Government in areas such as the roll out of high-speed broadband, remote working facilities, job creation, town centre regeneration, community development, improvements in regional and local roads, new cycling and walking infrastructure, expanded rural transport services, funding for tourism, culture and heritage projects, and a just transition to a climate-neutral society.

Ongoing dialogue is maintained by my Department with rural and urban stakeholders, in order to identify and respond to issues impacting on individuals and communities. I continue to work collaboratively with my Government colleagues to monitor the issues which impact our urban and rural communities and to support the creation of vibrant and sustainable communities across this country.

Question No. 108 answered with Question No. 103.

Island Communities

109. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the publication of the islands policy. [38172/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The development of a new Islands Policy is one of the key elements of *Our Rural Future*, the Government's new Rural Development Policy.

The central objective of the Islands Policy will be to ensure that sustainable vibrant communities continue to live on the offshore islands. An island consultation process was undertaken by my Department to inform the policy and to ensure that the island communities were and are central to the process.

The consultation process has assisted in identifying the main challenges faced by communities living on the offshore islands. Issues highlighted by the island communities included education, health, housing, energy, employment, broadband and access to services.

My officials are now engaging bilaterally with relevant Government Departments and Agencies to discuss the issues raised by island communities and to assess how they might be addressed. I expect Departments and Agencies to provide input and expertise on elements of the policy and agree commitments as it is developed.

Work has begun on preparing a first draft of the Islands Policy, but it is at a very early stage and is very much a work in progress. It was envisaged that the new Islands Policy would be published this year, however I am conscious that getting the policy right is the real priority and this will be the guiding principle going forward.

Rural Schemes

110. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the level of engagement she has had with other Departments to progress other areas of priority as outlined in Our Rural Future which do not come under her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38462/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Our Rural Future, the Rural Development Policy for 2021-2025, is the most ambitious and transformational policy for rural development in Ireland for decades, focusing on sustainability and optimising opportunities for individuals, communities and businesses.

It is a whole-of-Government approach to rural development which contains more than 150 measures for delivery by a wide range of Departments over the lifetime of the policy.

My Department engaged in extensive consultation with colleagues across Government during the development of Our Rural Future, and ongoing engagement will be crucial to its successful implementation.

The 2021 Our Rural Future Work Programme was developed in conjunction with other Government Departments and contains actions which advance the delivery of more than 80 per cent of commitments in the Policy. Further annual Work Programmes will be developed to progress implementation over the lifetime of the Policy. I am happy to report that a number of the actions which fall under the remit of other Departments have already been substantially advanced, such as the approval of the Athlone IT /Limerick IT application for designation as a technical university and the publication of the draft new Agri-Food Strategy to 2030 as part of a public consultation process.

My Department will continue to engage bilaterally with Departments, Agencies and Local Authorities as required with regard to progressing measures which are relevant to their remit or where responsibility for delivery is shared.

In addition to annual work programmes, Our Rural Future also commits to the publication of regular Progress Reports. My officials will also be seeking updates from Departments later this year in respect of the actions to be delivered in 2021 for inclusion in the first Progress Report, and also to discuss measures for possible inclusion in the 2022 Work Programme.

Finally, in order to maximise the impact of Our Rural Future and to maintain dialogue with rural communities, my Department will be rolling out a range of stakeholder engagement events in 2021, and on an ongoing basis thereafter. These and other engagements will involve other departments and feed back into the consideration of future Work Programmes throughout the five-year lifespan of the Policy.

Youth Emigration

111. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if her Department has undertaken studies on the impact of youth emigration on rural Ireland. [38322/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department published Our Rural Future, a new five-year rural development policy, in March this year. It is the most ambitious and transformational policy for rural development in Ireland for decades.

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The policy has a vision for a sustainable and vibrant rural Ireland, one in which communities, including young people, are empowered to take an active role in the decisions affecting them.

While my Department has not undertaken specific studies on the impact of youth emigration on rural Ireland, my officials and I are fully aware of the challenges and opportunity costs associated with young people leaving rural areas.

In developing the Policy, we listened carefully to young people in rural areas about their aspirations and the challenges they face.

Our Rural Future acknowledges the importance of encouraging and facilitating young people to become and remain active and engaged in the future of their communities. The policy was developed after an extensive consultation process which included events co-designed with organisations such as Foróige, tailored to listening to young people from rural Ireland to better understand their perspectives.

Their feedback was valuable and these workshops helped us to identify a number of measures which will directly benefit young people and ensure their continued engagement. These include a commitment to establish an annual Rural Youth Assembly, the first of which is scheduled to take place later this year, and to undertake research on outcomes for children and young people in rural areas. Our consultation process also incorporated an online public survey, which endorsed our initial key findings.

To ensure that young people's opinions continue to be considered, my officials are engaged in ongoing bilateral discussions and collaborations with relevant departments and agencies, including the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

Departmental Policies

112. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the establishment of a forum for ongoing dialogue between local authorities, relevant policy Departments and island communities pursuant to Our Rural Future – Rural Development Policy 2021 – 2025; when she expects the forum to be up and running; the regularity with which the forum will hold meetings; the membership of the forum; the terms of reference of the forum; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38319/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Our Rural Future represents the Irish Government's blueprint for the development of rural Ireland over the next five years. It provides the framework to achieve the vision of transforming the quality of life and opportunity for people living in rural areas. As the Deputy is aware, Our Rural Future contains a number of policy measures relating to the islands including the establishment of a forum.

My Department is currently developing a National Islands Policy for the inhabited offshore islands. Overall, the vision is this policy will lead to the agreement of a number of objectives across all policy areas to support, promote and empower our island communities. Implementation of the policy will improve the quality of life of island communities by fully taking into account the unique context of the islands.

As part of this process my Department has held bilateral meetings with the relevant Local Authorities regarding the policy's development and the establishment of a forum has been discussed in this context.

Although the drafting of the National Islands Policy is still at an early stage, the establishment of a forum for ongoing dialogue between local authorities, relevant policy Departments and island communities will be the subject of further dialogue as the policy development process continues.

Departmental Funding

113. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the number of projects funded currently under the Rural Regeneration Fund; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38485/21]

117. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the progress made to date with the roll-out of the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund of €1 billion; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37162/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 113 and 117 together.

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) forms part of the wider rural regeneration and development programme which also includes the Town and Village Renewal Scheme and the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme.

In terms of RRDF Category 1 (Major Projects), three calls for applications have been completed to date, while two calls for applications have been completed in relation to Category 2 (Seed Funding). Arising from the outcome of these calls, 89 Category 1 projects have been approved for funding of €215 million for projects worth €292 million. 75 Category 2 projects have been approved for funding of €34 million for projects worth €46 million. In total, funding of €249 million has been approved to date for 164 projects worth a total of €338 million.

The most recent announcement in relation to the Fund was the completion of the third call for Category 1 applications in April 2021, with 25 projects emerging as successful and funding of €81 million allocated.

Unfortunately, significant delays in the delivery of projects funded through the RRDF and other schemes have been experienced due to the pandemic and its effects on the construction sector. However, with construction now fully underway it is expected that strong progress will be achieved on projects for the remainder of the year and, consequently, drawdown by lead parties will accelerate significantly. The total spend to date in relation to the 164 approved projects stands at €70.74 million.

I announced the third call for Category 2 applications in May 2021. The closing date for applications was 30th July 2021 at 12 pm. An application and guidance document is available on my Department's website.

Harbours and Piers

114. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development further to Parliamentary Question No. 44 of 25 May 2021, the status of the development of Caladh Mór pier on Inis Meáin; the status of the preparation of a simulation model of the harbour by the National Maritime College of Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38317/21]

15 July 2021

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy will be aware, Galway County Council are the body responsible for development of stage three of the Caladh Mór pier development on Inis Meáin. Officials from my Department have been in ongoing contact with the relevant officials in the County Council to progress matters.

The National Maritime College of Ireland (NMCI) have been developing a model simulation for the harbour on Inis Meáin, which will inform the Business Case options for the development. Due to COVID-19 restrictions access to the NMCI facility had been very limited and as a result progress with the model simulation was somewhat delayed.

With the easing of some COVID 19 related restrictions, the NMCI were able to host a small group of islanders, ferry operators and officials last week at their facility in Ringaskiddy for a demonstration of the marine simulation.

Following feedback from the various parties, the NMCI are going to further develop the simulation and there will be a further more extensive demonstration held upon completion. I understand from Department officials who viewed the simulation that it presents vessel operators with an extremely realistic experience of sea conditions and that it is expected to greatly assist in identifying development options for the pier.

Departmental Schemes

115. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will report on her engagement with an organisation (details supplied) concerning the employment of additional rural recreational officers. [38169/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Walks Scheme, which is funded by my Department, contracts landholders to undertake maintenance work on National Waymarked Ways and other priority trails that traverse their lands. The landholders receive modest payments for maintenance work undertaken in line with agreed work plans.

My Department commissioned an external review of the Walks Scheme to examine the delivery and strategic development of the Scheme, and assess the role and resourcing of the Rural Recreation Officer (RRO) posts throughout the country. The reviewers were also required to consider the level of funding provided to the Local Development Companies to deliver the scheme. The final report was received by my Department this week and I expect to be in a position to publish the report after the contents have been fully considered. The recommendations contained in the review will inform decisions on the ongoing delivery and further strategic expansion of the scheme, including the resourcing of Local Development Companies and any additional Rural Recreation Officer positions.

I am aware that an issue has arisen with the delivery of the scheme by the organisation referred to by the deputy. Officials from my Department formally met with the organisation concerned on Friday, 2nd July. I understand that the company outlined the challenges presented by the large number of participants it manages over a wide area, and the implications of this for the one full-time equivalent Rural Recreation Officer position there. It is clear that the company has a significant workload relative to other areas and I believe that this is something that we can respond to as part of the implementation of the Review of the Walks Scheme.

Island Communities

116. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development her plans to improve the number and quality of the air services and ferry services to the islands; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37163/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The recently published rural policy ‘Our Rural Future’ underlines this Government’s continued commitment to our offshore island communities. It is a core part of the policy to support those communities by funding programmes that deliver transport services that are affordable, reliable and of a high quality and, by doing so, to maintain sustainable vibrant communities on the islands.

Since 1997 the number of state subsidised services for the islands has increased from one ferry service to 25 separate services. These provide year-round ferry, cargo and - where applicable - air services to 19 off-shore islands. There are no plans at present to provide any new subsidised services.

To ensure that the quality of these services is maintained, my Department works closely with the operators, island representative groups and organisations to monitor the services and to make sure they are delivered in a safe, timely and professional manner.

As the COVID-19 travel restrictions continue to ease, my officials will once again have the opportunity to engage directly with all stakeholders to ensure that the services continue to be delivered as contracted. Issues regarding the quality of the service form a part of this monitoring process.

As technologies evolve and better quality vessels and airplanes become available to the market, the Department will review the Request for Tender documents to encourage potential operators to upgrade their fleet of vessels or airplanes so that travellers can expect a higher quality of service as they travel to and from the islands.

Question No. 117 answered with Question No. 113.

National Broadband Plan

118. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will work with the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications to improve remote working facilities for persons in a location (details supplied) in areas which do not have high-quality broadband. [38634/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The increased shift to remote working as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has given us the opportunity for a greater regional distribution of jobs and to support a better quality of life for many people who previously spent many hours in long commutes. This is a key focus of the Government’s new rural development policy Our Rural Future.

Remote working, supported by appropriate infrastructure and facilities, has the potential to encourage more people to live in rural areas while working in good quality jobs, no matter where their employer is based. It can also help revitalise our rural town if remote working hubs are developed in their centres.

Officials from my Department continue to work closely with officials from the Department

of Environment, Climate and Communications to deliver the Broadband Connection Point (BCP) initiative - a key part of the National Broadband Plan. It is now in the latter stages of delivery and as of 6 July, 203 Broadband Connection Points are live and in use, with the remaining sites in the process of being surveyed, installed or tested. The map of live BCPs can be found on: nbi.ie/bcp-map/. Of the 24 BCPs scheduled for delivery for County Cork, 16 have been delivered - a number of which are offering remote working facilities.

I launched the National Hub Network, connectedhubs.ie, on 31 May in the Swinford Digi-west Hub in Co. Mayo. Since the launch, 113 hubs have signed on and are now using the platform, with an additional 49 hubs in the process of being onboarded. Furthermore, the number of hubs identified through the Western Development Commission's hub discovery process has increased to 505. These are in the process of being verified before they are mapped on connectedhubs.ie/nationalhubsmap.html. This interactive map provides useful information in relation to each of the hubs and the services that are available at each site. At present, there are approximately 20 hubs registered on the platform in County Cork, with more likely to be added in the future.

Work on the National Hub Network is overseen by an Inter-Departmental Steering Group, which is chaired by my Department. The Department of Environment, Climate and Communications is represented on the Steering Group.

Since 2016 my Department has invested more than €50 million in the development of remote working facilities through the Town and Village Renewal Scheme and the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund. Investment in new remote working facilities will continue in 2021 through further calls for both schemes.

I have also allocated €5 million to fund a Connected Hubs Call this year. This initiative will provide funding to support remote working by supporting small scale capital works in existing hubs and Broadband Connection Points. Applications are currently being evaluated by my officials and I expect to shortly be in a position to announce the results of the evaluation process.

Community Development Projects

119. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when and the way the Government will move on its commitment in the Programme for Government to support independent local action groups not reporting to the local authority or its LCDC subcommittees in the Leader application process given that the CAP budget is agreed by the member states. [38312/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy is aware, the negotiations on the CAP regulations were provisionally agreed at the Council of Ministers Meeting on 28/29 June. Technical discussions to finalise the legal text will take place under the Slovenian Presidency.

The Programme for Government contains a number of commitments in relation to the LEADER Programme, including a commitment to promote the role of independent Local Action Groups and supported by Local Community Development Communities.

Over the past number of months, officials in my Department have been engaging with stakeholders such as the Irish Local Development Network and the Local Government Management Agency, in the design of the next LEADER Programme. This consultation will continue as the process of agreeing the new CAP Strategic Plan with the EU Commission develops.

The question of the administrative structures for the delivery of the 2023-2027 programme will be considered as part of the design of the next CAP Strategic Plan, having regard, inter alia, to the provisions of the EU Regulations governing the structure of future LAGs, a review of the 2014-2020 programme and the outcome of consultations with all relevant stakeholders.

Departmental Schemes

120. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the commitment to examine the scope to introduce new supports and incentives for the refurbishment of vacant properties to increase town centre living based on the report of the pilot town centre living initiative pursuant to Our Rural Future – Rural Development Policy 2021 – 2025; the details of the organization, State body or agency carrying out this examination; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38320/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): There are a range of initiatives outlined in Our Rural Future which will contribute to addressing vacancy in our towns and villages.

The refurbishment of vacant properties is already being addressed by a number of funding streams delivered by my Department, including the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund and the Town & Village Renewal Scheme.

Our Rural Future includes a commitment to develop and deliver a Town Centre First approach to addressing the future development of our towns and villages. Linked to this it also commits, as part of Budget 2022, to examining the scope to introduce new supports and incentives for the refurbishment of vacant properties to increase town centre living.

This will be examined as part of the budgetary process this year and will be informed by the work of the Inter-Departmental Group (IDG) established to progress the Town Centre First Approach.

Departmental Schemes

121. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if a provision will be made for additional rural recreational officers for the walk schemes in west County Cork delivered under a partnership (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38455/21]

133. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the resources being considered for additional rural recreational officers for the walks schemes in west County Cork given further submissions by a partnership (details supplied) have been made under outdoor recreational infrastructure scheme for new walk schemes to be included for west County Cork with further rural recreational officers required to cover this area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38718/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 121 and 133 together.

The Walks Scheme, which is funded by my Department, contracts landholders to undertake maintenance work on National Waymarked Ways and other priority trails that traverse their lands. The landholders receive modest payments for maintenance work undertaken in line with agreed work plans.

15 July 2021

My Department commissioned an external review of the Walks Scheme to examine the delivery and strategic development of the Scheme, and assess the role and resourcing of the Rural Recreation Officer (RRO) posts throughout the country. The reviewers were also required to consider the level of funding provided to the Local Development Companies to deliver the scheme. The final report was received by my Department this week and I expect to be in a position to publish the report after the contents have been fully considered. The recommendations contained in the review will inform decisions on the further strategic expansion of the scheme, including the resourcing of Local Development Companies.

West Cork Development Partnership has two very significant trails funded under the Walks Scheme – the Beara Way and the Sheep’s Head Way. There are almost 580 landholders funded under these two walks receiving funding of about €650,000. West Cork Development Partnership also receives funding for one full-time equivalent RRO position.

I am aware that an issue has arisen with the delivery of the scheme in West Cork and officials from my Department formally met with West Cork Development Partnership on Friday, 2nd July. I understand that the company outlined the challenges presented by the large number of participants on the Scheme in West Cork and the extensive area covered by the trails there. It is clear that the company has a significant workload relative to other areas and I believe that this is something that we can respond to as part of the implementation of the Review of the Walks Scheme.

I am committed to working with all of the stakeholders, including West Cork Development Partnership, to ensure that the scheme can continue to function effectively.

Regulatory Impact Assessments

122. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if compliance and regulatory requirements will be reviewed in 2022 to ensure that no duplication of the process occurs given the burden of the cost of regulatory and compliance requirements to community, voluntary and charity groups. [38528/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O’Brien): The Charities Regulatory Authority (Charities Regulator) is the statutory body responsible for regulating charitable organisations in Ireland. The Charities Regulator was established on 16 October, 2014 pursuant to the Charities Act 2009.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to update legislative provisions with the Charities Regulator, to ensure it has the necessary powers to increase trust and confidence in the management and administration of charities.

There is ongoing liaison between officials in my Department and the Charities Regulator to review the operation of the legislation to ensure that it is operating effectively, and to consider amendments to the 2009 Act. This work is at an advanced stage and I intend bringing proposals to Government in the near future to progress the legislation.

In 2019, my Department published Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities - A five year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland 2019-2024. The strategy reaffirms the Government’s commitment to supporting the sector and addressing some of the burdens faced by service providers, whilst also recognising the reality of finite resources and the need to ensure that available resources are focused on providing effective services.

The strategy commits, inter alia, to develop appropriate compliance and monitoring ar-

rangements and support capacity in the community development, local development and the broader community and voluntary sector to meet them, including:

- reviewing the appropriateness of regulatory compliance requirements;
- developing and implementing a strategy to reduce, streamline and standardise all public-funded programme and regulatory monitoring, reporting and compliance requirements, where appropriate,
- and resource and support organisations to fulfil compliance requirements.

The implementation of the strategy is being overseen by the Cross-Sectoral Group on Local and Community Development. A key role for this group is to support this Department in the prioritisation of objectives and actions to be progressed within the framework of annual workplans.

I recognise the concerns of the sector and I am committed to addressing this challenge in collaboration with relevant stakeholders.

Departmental Schemes

123. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development her plans and timelines for further rounds of ORIS, CLAR, RRDF, town and village and community enhancement funding schemes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38521/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Details of funding under the RRDF, Town and Village Renewal Scheme, ORIS, CLAR, and Community Enhancement Programme are provided below:

RRDF

The third call for Category 2 applications to the Fund was announced on 12th May. The development of large scale projects requires significant resources and the Category 2 funding provided through this call will enable projects to reach a stage where they are developed to a high standard and ready to commence. This will ensure there is a pipeline of high-quality, ambitious projects ready to compete for funding in future Category 1 calls from the Fund.

I am seeking large scale projects for RRDF funding that will drive economic growth, combat dereliction and breathe new life into town centres. The closing date for applications to the recent category 2 call was 12pm on 30th July 2021. Guidance material and an applications form is available my Department's website. I expect to also announce a further category 1 call this year.

Town and Village Renewal Scheme

Since its launch in 2016, almost €93 million has been allocated to more than 1,300 projects across Ireland. Under Budget 2021, €15 million has been allocated for the Town and Village Scheme. Expressions of interest are sought locally and a number of these are then developed into proposals by the Local Authorities and submitted to my Department by July 16th.

The 2021 Scheme will prioritise tackling vacancy in towns and villages, remote working and supporting town centre living. Priority will be given to projects that bring vacant and derelict buildings and sites back into use as multi-purpose spaces and/or for remote hubs or residential occupancy. Multi-purpose use includes enterprise spaces, arts, tourism, youth hubs and

other community use. There are a range of other actions eligible including projects to develop parks, green spaces and recreational amenities in town centres.

CLÁR

Since the CLÁR programme was relaunched in 2016, it has provided funding of almost €39 million for over 1,600 projects.

A 10% increase in funding was secured for the scheme this year, bringing the allocation for 2021 to €5.5 million. CLÁR 2021 was launched on 15th March 2021 with a budget of €5.5m and the closing date for all Measures, except the Innovation Measure, was 7th May. The Innovation Measure closed on Friday, 21st May.

ORIS

Since 2016, funding of almost €68 million has been allocated to nearly 1,000 projects through the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme.

A 20% increase in funding was secured for the scheme this year, together with the continuing contribution from Fáilte Ireland, brings the total funding available for projects under the 2021 Scheme to €14 million. ORIS 2021 was launched on 23rd April 2021. The closing date for Measure 1 has passed and assessment of applications is underway. The closing date for Measures 2 & 3 and the Project Development Measure is Friday, 30th July 2021.

Community Enhancement Programme

From 2018 to 2020 €25 million has been provided in funding for the Community Enhancement Programme supporting over 8,000 community groups/organisations.

The 2021 CEP was launched on 10th May with funding of €4.5million. It provides small grants for projects or equipment enhancing facilities and one-off grants towards reopening or the sustainability of a facility. Applicants should contact the LCDCs that administer the programme for further details.

In order to allow flexibility, the Department did not set a national closing date. Each LCDC can set its own to best suit its area, but it must be no later than 16th July 2021. As a result the CEP closed recently in some LCDC areas and is open in others. Some funding is ring-fenced to provide small grants of €1,000 or less. It is administered by LCDCs in order to address disadvantage as identified in their Local Economic and Community Plan.

Digital Hubs

124. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the extent to which she continues to develop the concept of digital hubs with a view to facilitating employers and employees who may wish to replicate the original workspace location with a virtual presence resulting in a situation of benefit to both employers and employees; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38181/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The increased shift to remote working as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has given us the opportunity for a greater regional distribution of jobs and to support a better quality of life for many people who previously spent many hours in long commutes. This is a key focus of the Government's new rural development policy Our Rural Future.

Remote working, supported by appropriate infrastructure and facilities, has the potential to encourage more people to live in rural areas while working in good quality jobs, no matter where their employer is based. It can also help revitalise our rural town if remote working hubs are developed in their centres.

I launched the National Hub Network, connectedhubs.ie, on 31 May in the Swinford Digiwest Hub in Co. Mayo. Since the launch, 113 hubs have signed on and are now using the platform, with an additional 49 hubs in the process of being onboarded. Furthermore, the number of hubs identified through the Western Development Commission's hub discovery process has increased to 505. These are in the process of being verified before they are mapped on connectedhubs.ie/nationalhubsmat.html. This interactive map provides useful information in relation to each of the hubs and the services that are available at each site.

My Department also continues to invest significantly in the development of new Hub facilities across the country. Since 2015, the Town and Village Renewal Scheme has provided €7.8m in funding to hubs and hub-related projects. Many of the successful projects involve the regeneration of historic town centre buildings as Enterprise and Co-Working Hubs.

I recently announced funding of €15 million that is available under the 2021 Town & Village Renewal Scheme (TVRS). In line with Our Rural Future, a key focus of this year's scheme is to renovate derelict and vacant buildings in our town centres, and specifically supports bringing vacant properties in town centres back into use or repurpose existing community or publicly owned buildings as remote working hubs.

In addition, I have also allocated €5 million to fund a Connected Hubs Call this year. This initiative will provide funding to support small scale capital works in existing hubs and Broadband Connection Points. Applications are currently being evaluated by my officials and I expect to shortly be in a position to announce the results of the evaluation process.

Departmental Funding

125. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will seek to avail of the facility of community-led local development funds such as the European Social Fund and European Regional Development Fund to add to the traditional Rural Development Programme funding and give the local action groups a sustainable budget for five to six years and also broaden their scope for action in this crucial time in the recovery of rural areas from Covid-19 and Brexit, given that the CAP budget is significantly reduced on previous funding periods, the 2014-2020 Leader programme budget was approximately 60% of the value of the same programme less than a decade ago and projections on existing figures indicating a further reduction to approximately 33% of the budget a decade ago. [38313/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The LEADER programme is co-financed by the European Commission under Pillar 2 of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), through the European Agriculture Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD).

In December 2020, I launched the Transitional LEADER Programme which came into effect from 1 April 2021 and will run to the end of 2022. A total of €70 million is being made available over this programming period. €65 million of this budget is available to Local Action Groups (LAGs) who deliver the programme and approve projects at local level. This allocation covers both core project expenditure and the administration and animation costs of the LAGs.

€20 million of this Transitional LEADER Programme is funded by the European Union

Recovery Instrument, which will enable local communities and enterprises an opportunity to respond in a community-led local development manner to COVID-19.

The EU budget, the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF), is a seven-year spending plan, allowing the EU to plan and invest in long-term projects. As part of this, EU Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) are allocated to Ireland according to the Irish Partnership Agreement, which was developed by stakeholders and the Irish Government, in conjunction with the European Commission. The current Partnership Agreement was adopted in 2014 for the period 2014-2020.

The Partnership Agreement is designed to ensure that ESIF funding is used to its full potential throughout Ireland and that funds complement one other. It is also designed to help prevent double funding. It is also framed by various evaluations and public consultations conducted within Ireland.

The Partnership Agreement for the next round of funding is currently being developed.

It is a matter for each Managing Authority for the funds referenced by the Deputy to decide how to disburse each fund. Officials within my Department are exploring the options for community-led local development funding within other EU funding streams.

The total level of funding available for the next LEADER Programme will not be finalised until the process of designing all of the interventions in the new CAP Strategic Plan is more advanced.

Departmental Policies

126. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the development of the rural proofing model promised as part of the Our Rural Future – Rural Development Policy 2021 – 2025; the timeline for the roll-out of the model; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38318/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Our Rural Future is the most ambitious and transformational policy for rural development in Ireland for decades.

The policy contains 152 measures for delivery, developed across the whole of Government, with the underlying theme of economic, environmental and societal sustainability. The policy has a vision of vibrant and thriving rural towns and villages, with a key objective to maximise opportunities for individuals, communities and businesses in rural areas. It recognises that rural areas play an integral role in the economic, social and cultural recovery and well-being of the country.

The policy commits to developing an effective rural proofing model. This will ensure that all departments fully consider the effects of new proposals on rural communities, the needs for potential adjustments to better target the challenges and opportunities facing rural areas, and the identification of any impacts that may arise in this regard.

As outlined in the 2021 Our Rural Future Work Programme, available on my Department's website, the rural proofing model process will begin later this year with a scoping exercise, including an assessment of international best practice in this area. As part of this process my Department will engage with international stakeholders, such as the OECD, to assess and learn from other countries' experiences. My officials will also engage with colleagues across

Government and with the Higher Education Network that is being established this year under another commitment in Our Rural Future.

We must ensure that any rural proofing process adopted by Government is effective, efficient and implementable. It is also of note that this model is not intended to replace the formal structures for the monitoring of policy implementation as overseen by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment, chaired by An Taoiseach.

Question No. 127 answered with Question No. 89.

Departmental Schemes

128. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she plans to expand the walks scheme; if further funding will be allocated to the scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38174/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department administers the Walks Scheme through which landholders receive modest payments for maintenance works on approved walking trails that traverse their land. The payment is linked to an agreed work plan for the section of the trail maintained by the landholder.

The Walks Scheme is currently operating on 45 trails supported by 2,040 landholders and is being managed by 16 Local Development Companies (LDCs) around the country.

In December 2019, it was announced that 10 new trails would be added to the Scheme under the first phase of an expansion of the scheme. While the process of inspecting these new trails was delayed in part due to the COVID-19 restrictions, an online system was developed in late 2020 to carry out the necessary checks and inspections to allow the trails to fully join the scheme. To date, 6 of these new trails have been approved and payments have issued to landholders.

The Programme for Government contains a commitment to expand the Walks Scheme to achieve a target of 80 trails. A decision in respect of the further trails to be added to the Scheme will be taken following the publication of an external review of the Walks Scheme. Work in completing this review is well advanced and I expect to be in a position to publish the review shortly.

Trails that wish to be added to the Scheme are invited to submit an Expression of Interest to my Department. There is no closing date for Expressions of Interest at this time, and interested parties can continue to submit proposals for additional trails to be included in the scheme, through their Local Authority or Local Development Company. A trail must meet specific qualifying criteria in order to be considered eligible for the scheme, including being of a suitable standard to be included in Sport Ireland Outdoors' trail register.

Youth Assembly

129. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when the rural youth assembly will be established; the way the assembly is expected to be structured; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38604/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department published Our Rural Future, a new five-year rural development policy, in March

this year. It is the most ambitious and transformational policy for rural development in Ireland for decades.

The policy has a vision for vibrant towns and villages across rural Ireland, with economic, environmental and societal sustainability as an underlying theme, where communities, including young people, are empowered to take an active role in the decisions affecting their communities.

Our Rural Future was developed after an extensive consultation process which started in January 2019. This process included dedicated events for young people, in collaboration with youth organisations such as Foróige, which were tailored to the youth of rural Ireland and were dedicated to listening to the particular challenges they face.

Their feedback received from this process was extremely valuable and the workshops helped to identify a number of potential opportunities. As a result, the 152 policy measures in Our Rural Future include actions created specifically for the direct benefit of young people and to ensure their continued engagement, including the commitment to establish an annual Rural Youth Assembly.

We anticipate that the first Rural Youth Assembly will be held later this year. The format – whether a physical or virtual event – and the structure of the Assembly will be confirmed nearer the time following discussions with relevant stakeholders, including the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. It is intended that the outcomes of the first meeting of the Assembly will help inform future measures to be included in the implementation of Our Rural Future over the coming years.

Dormant Accounts Fund

130. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when funds held in the disbursement fund under the Dormant Accounts Fund will be distributed for the benefit of addressing social, economic or educational disadvantage or assisting persons with a disability; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38460/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): Under the Dormant Accounts Fund legislation a Disbursement Scheme is prepared at least every three years. This sets out the objectives to be achieved by making disbursements from the account, and the strategies for achieving these objectives. Then, to give effect to the Disbursement Scheme, Action Plans must be prepared, at least once a year. These Action Plans contain details of programmes and projects to be funded under the Disbursement Scheme. They set out the maximum amount proposed for disbursement in relation to each programme or project during the period to which the Action Plan relates. Measures approved for funding in any Action Plan must, in the first instance, be funded from the Vote of the Department or agency concerned. The expenditure incurred in implementing an approved measure is then reimbursed from the Dormant Accounts Fund, rendering the measure Exchequer neutral. The Disbursement Schemes and Action Plans are available on the Department's website at www.gov.ie/en/policy-information/c376c9-dormant-accounts-fund/

The majority of measures approved in an Action Plan progress in that year, subject to the voted expenditure of each Department allowing for the measure to progress. It is also important to note that measures approved in an annual action plan may progress over a number of years and the allocations provided for can be disbursed from the fund over that period. As such, funds held within the disbursement fund are utilized on an ongoing basis. The utilization of funds has

increased in recent years and total disbursements in 2020 stood at €93.5 million, which included €50 million in once off Covid-19 supports. Measures under the 2021 Action Plan are currently being progressed, and the Action Plan for 2022 will be published in the final quarter of 2021.

Question No. 131 answered with Question No. 101.

Departmental Schemes

132. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the status of the town and village renewal scheme following recent expressions of interest submitted to local authorities; if her Department has received funding applications from local authorities; if so, the likely timeline to approve applications; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38558/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): In May, I announced funding of €15 million under the 2021 Town and Village Renewal Standard Scheme. The 2021 Scheme is a key part of Our Rural Future – the Government’s five year strategy to revitalise rural Ireland. This year the scheme has a particular focus on vacancy and dereliction, and supporting efforts to bring vacant properties back into use in our towns and villages.

The Scheme is administered through Local Authorities, who following consultation with local communities and businesses, submit up to 8 applications to my Department to be assessed on a competitive basis. The minimum grant is available is €20,000. I have increased the maximum grant available this year to €500,000.

The closing date for submission of applications to my Department is tomorrow, 16 July 2021. The assessment process will commence once all of the applications have been received and registered. I expect to announce the successful projects early in Quarter 4 of this year.

The deputy may also be aware that an additional €5m has been allocated under the scheme this year for investment in digital hubs through a separate Connected Hubs fund. This fund was launched on 29th April and is now closed for applications. It will support the development of Ireland’s first national network of remote working hubs and fund small scale capital works in existing hubs and Broadband Connection Points. The applications received are currently being assessed and it is expected that this process will be completed shortly.

Question No. 133 answered with Question No. 121.

Covid-19 Pandemic

134. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if a commercial landlord can be prevented from increasing the rent on a commercial property given the financial impact that the Covid-19 pandemic has had on many businesses; if rent protections are available to commercial tenants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38791/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I understand some businesses are under pressure to meet their fixed costs, such as rent, after what has been an exceptionally challenging period. At the same time, we must remember that commercial landlords have their own financial obligations that still need to be paid. Where a landlord has debt in place, their flexibility will likely be driven by what their bank/lender will

accept. One person's rent might be another person's income or pension.

The Government has urged commercial landlords and tenants to talk to one another and come to some arrangement, as it is in everybody's interest that terms are amicably agreed. Landlords should be willing to do what they can to help their tenants to continue to operate rather than facing the risk of a vacant premises and inability to obtain new tenants. Equally, tenants should pay what they can and speak with their landlord when difficulties arise.

Last October, I published the Code of Conduct between landlords and tenants for commercial rents. The aim of this Code is to facilitate discussions between landlords and tenants impacted by COVID-19. It sets out a structured approach for engagement between both commercial landlords and tenants, based on their mutual interest in continuing to work together.

However, the Code should not be seen in isolation. The Government has put in place a comprehensive package to help businesses through the crisis including the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), the COVID-19 Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), Small Business Assistance Scheme for COVID (SBASC), the forthcoming Business Resumption Support Scheme (BRSS), low-cost loans, the deferral and warehousing of tax liabilities and the waiver of commercial rates. Many of these alone, or in combination, can be used to assist in the payment of commercial rents if needed.

The Land & Conveyancing Law Reform Act 2009 and related matters, such as rent reviews, are a matter for the Minister for Justice. However, I understand that, since the enactment of the Land & Conveyancing Law Reform Act 2009, 'upwards only' rent review clauses are prohibited in all leases created after 28 February 2010 and leases, since then, must allow for the rent to go upwards, or downwards, on review. Typically, the new rent is based on the evidence of new lettings of comparable properties at the time the review falls due. Where a tenant disputes the rent review, the matter is usually referred to an independent chartered surveyor, who acts as an arbitrator or expert and decides the new rent.

Departmental Schemes

135. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of an application for the capital investment scheme by a company (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38878/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): Applications for funding received under the competitive Capital Investment Scheme are currently being assessed and evaluated by Enterprise Ireland. Given the competitive nature of this scheme, I am not at liberty to comment on the specifics of particular applications received.

Farm Safety

136. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which his Department continues to monitor the level of farm accidents; if further measures are contemplated to address the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38954/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): The Health and Safety Authority (HSA) investigate every farm fatality. In

addition, data is collected on incidents at work as part under the Framework Directive 89/391/EEC (1) on measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work.

Each year the HSA publishes a comprehensive review of workplace injuries, illnesses and fatalities. The latest report was published in July 2021 and relates to the period 2019 – 2020. In addition, the HSA will shortly publish a review of work-related death in agriculture in Ireland from 2011 – 2020. The information and findings from the reports are used to inform future programmes of work and to identify key issues to focus on during awareness raising campaigns, inspection campaigns, and engagements with key stakeholders.

Under its current strategy statement (2019-2021), the HSA has identified agriculture as a priority sector. In support of this prioritisation, the HSA has an extensive farm safety prevention programme in place, which focusses on the provision of advice, guidance, e-tools and educational supports for the sector, as well as targeted inspection campaigns. This programme is delivered in a collaborative manner and involves the key farming stakeholder groups along with government agencies and departments.

Initiatives and measures are in place to educate, raise awareness and help prevent the injuries and fatalities prevalent in the farming community. Extensive guidance and information on all aspects of farm safety, developed by the HSA in consultation with stakeholders, is freely available. The core of this being a user-friendly Farm Safety Code of Practice and half-day training program on its practical use delivered by the Teagasc advisory service and independent agricultural advisers.

Later this month, the HSA will roll out a proactive inspection programme to coincide with Farm Safety Week (19 - 23 July) which is an annual event led by the Farm Safety Foundation and takes place across the UK and in the Republic of Ireland.

Farm Safety

137. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of persons who died or were injured in farm accidents in each of the past five years to date; the actions taken and or pending to address farm safety; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38955/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Damien English): Agriculture is among the priority sectors identified by the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) in its current strategy. This sector, therefore, receives a sustained focus in the delivery of the HSA's occupational health and safety policy and inspection programmes.

The HSA investigates every farm fatality. The findings from these investigations inform and focus future farm safety promotion, prevention and inspection campaign initiatives.

In the five year period from 2016 to 2020, there have been 100 farming fatalities. To date in 2021, three fatal incidents have occurred in this sector. Table 1 details the breakdown of the number of fatalities for each of the years requested.

The HSA collects data on incidents at work in compliance with the Framework Directive 89/391/EEC (1) on measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health of workers at work. There can be considerable underreporting of work-related incidents, with smaller enterprises and self-employed people less likely to report incidents than larger enterprises. As self-employment is common in the agricultural sector, underreporting of non-fatal work-related incidents is likely. Table 2 details the breakdown of the number of non-fatal injuries for each of

the years requested.

The latest available data (2019) from the Central Statistics Office’s special module on work-related injuries and illnesses, which is collected as part of the Labour Force Survey, indicates that the rate of work-related injuries leading to four or more days of absence from work in the Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing sector in 2019 was 10.7 per 1,000 workers. In comparison, the five-year average rate for 2015–2019 was 13.1.

The HSA is undertaking a number of specific programmes and campaigns to target specific risks within the farming sector which include the provision of guidance, e-tools, online testimonials, and targeted awareness campaigns.

The HSA have a long-standing Farm Safety Partnership Advisory Committee which is chaired by a Board member of the Authority and involves key stakeholders in addressing the health and safety concerns within the agriculture sector. The Committee’s Action Plan for 2021 to 2024 will be published shortly and will focus on identified high risk activities such as tractor and vehicle use, livestock handling and working at height. This plan will also seek to improve farmer skill levels in the areas of risk identification and management.

The HSA provides an online farm risk assessment tool, **farmsafely.com**, which recorded 13,227 active registered users in 2020. Later this month, the HSA will roll out a proactive inspection programme to coincide with Farm Safety Week (19-23 July) which is an annual event led by the Farm Safety Foundation and takes place across the UK and in the Republic of Ireland.

Table 1

Farm Fatalities 2016 – 2020				
2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
21	25	15	19	20

Table 2

Non-Fatal Injuries (Farming) Reported to the Authority				
2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
74	123	98	91	121

Digital Hubs

138. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which he and his Department continue to encourage major corporations currently located in this country to use digital hubs as a means of virtually bringing their employees under one roof with consequent benefit to all; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38977/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): IDA Ireland was one of many stakeholders who worked with the Department of Community and Rural Development on the project to implement the National Hubs Network which was branded **ConnectedHubs Ireland**. This project is now being managed by the Western Development Commission and is intended as a single registry of all remote working hubs in Ireland.

It is envisioned that there will be 450 Hubs listed nationally. 115 are already classified by the Western Development Commission and these Hubs will generally include formal serviced offices, co-working spaces and enterprise centres.

There is a web platform (similar to Airbnb) which has been operational since April 2021 which will allow users to identify available spaces, and book and pay online. Hubs will also be evaluated against the new National Association of Community Enterprise Centres (NACEC) Quality Mark-Standard/Certification criteria. Additional properties will be added on a phased basis.

IDA has liaised with the Western Development Commission on Public Relations, Content Creation & Marketing Collateral to ensure relevant messaging for an FDI audience. The availability of a national hubs network is an additional value proposition to add to the suite of other marketing tools for use in the attraction of FDI to Ireland and the hubs in addition provide a valuable option for existing multinational corporations to utilise if they wish to attract employees who do not live in close proximity to the entity.

Customs and Excise

139. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his attention has been drawn to significant increases in tariffs for steel products being imported from outside of the EU and the significant effect it will have on steel business going forward (details supplied) given the very serious lack of supply of an alternate EU-based supply; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38833/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As the Deputy may be aware, the European Union imposed safeguard measures on steel imports into the EU in July 2018 in response to the United States applying a 25% tariff on steel imports originating from 3rd Countries, including the European Union. As a consequence of the US measures, there was an increased risk of steel originally destined for the US market being diverted to the EU market and thereby distorting or severely disturbing the EU steel market. To address this risk, the EU introduced Steel Safeguards Measures in 2018 and these Measures have been continued by decision of the EU last month. The market situation has also been impacted by Brexit with the UK now a 3rd Country since 1 January this year and therefore also subject to the EU's Safeguards Measures. Accordingly, imports from the UK have a Tariff Rate Quota applying under the Safeguards Measures also.

The Measures currently in place allow for the importation of steel from 3rd Countries by way of quotas, determined in line with traditional volumes of trade in steel. The recent decision to continue the Measures for a minimum period of 2 years was based on a Commission-led review of the need for such Measures, undertaken at the request of several Member States, and which was conducted in the first half of 2021. The current Measures will be subject to a full review before 30 June 2023, to determine whether the Measures should be terminated in response to market conditions of trade in steel at that point in time.

Since applying the original Safeguard Measures in 2018, the European Commission has completed 3 reviews of the Measures, with the most recent review published in June 2021. The findings of that most recent review included details on the availability of quotas across the product categories impacted by the Measures. The Commission's review found that during the first three years of application of the Measures (July 2018 – May 2021), there have been consistent and increasing free-of-duty TRQ volumes available at the end of each period in nearly all product categories. For example, in year-3 of the measures up to 20 May 2021, 36% of the available TRQs in steel remained unused, some 11 million tonnes. Thus, the data available indicated that the application of the EU's Safeguard Measures does not affect the availability of supply, as quotas, under which imports do not attract the Safeguard Measures' tariff, are not exhausted before the end of a given period.

However, the Commission has also noted that some 3rd countries continue to demonstrate what it has described as “opportunistic behaviour” and “aggressive export tactics” under which they seek to maximise their market presence under the safeguard measures. This means that, in some extreme circumstances, a 3rd country maximises or exhausts their specific quarterly quota on day-one of the TRQ becoming available (e.g. on 1 July). This is despite the current Measures being designed to allow for traditional trade flows of steel, and, moreover, being designed to prevent, insofar as is possible, overcrowding the market and pushing out other 3rd country producers that are operating within the parameters of the Measures. At the same time, the Measures are designed to allow EU producers continue to compete in a fair and sustainable manner.

Specifically, in relation to the additional detail provided regarding imports of Category 21 Hollow Sections from Turkey, the Commission Implementing Regulation, brought into effect on 1 July 2021, allocated a country-specific TRQ for Turkey of some 70,000 tonnes of hollow steel for the quarter 1 July 2021 – 30 September 2021. The online TRQ calculator confirms that the full quota was exhausted on 1 July 2021, which supports the Commission position that some 3rd country exporters are applying damaging and aggressive trade tactics in relation to the utilisation of the available TRQ and is relevant to the case of interest to your enquiry.

Furthermore, Turkey was assigned the largest TRQ when compared to the other major exporters of Category 21 Hollow Sections. Comparatively, the next ranked 3rd country, the United Kingdom was assigned a TRQ of 42,000 tonnes for the same period and as of 12 July 2021, there remains a balance of 10,000 tonnes that can be imported from the United Kingdom within the available TRQ. Similarly, North Macedonia was assigned nearly 23,000 tonnes for the same period and there remains some 19,000 tonnes of the TRQ available. My Department’s analysis suggests that of the 7 countries assigned a specific quarterly TRQ, only Turkey and Russia have exhausted their quarterly TRQ already and there remains TRQs available in the other 5 countries with a country specific TRQ and some 64,000 tonnes available within the global quota.

Notwithstanding the general level of availability of TRQs across the system, it is recognised that importers can face significant administrative burdens when trying to source material from 3rd countries where there is a limited commercial relationship between the producer and the importer. In that regard, officials in my Department have routinely raised this concern with Commission officials and will continue to do so on foot of the information that has been included as part of this Parliamentary Question. It is in the interest of our steel importers that they develop strong commercial relationships with a range of 3rd country producers to ensure that they can source their requirements from a diverse range of 3rd country providers.

Moreover, it is important to note that the current Measures in place include a 3% year-on-year liberalisation rate which means that the available TRQs increase each year by 3% from the benchmark period of 2015-2017. Therefore, TRQs for the periods 2021/22 and 2022/23 will reach the import highs recorded in 2018 when the Measures were first introduced, meaning that imports of steel into the EU will have to exceed the import levels of 2018 before the 25% safeguard tariff would apply. In designing the Measures, the European Commission has sought to ensure full compliance with the safeguard rules provided for under the World Trade Organisation and the Commission has reassured Member States that it continues to monitor the situation for both producers, users and importers to limit any negative impact of the application of the Measures.

Finally, officials in my Department continue to engage with Irish industry and representative groups on the matter and liaise closely with EU officials regarding the operation of the safeguard measures to ensure that they continue to meet their objective in guarding EU steel producers from the harmful impact of trade diversion of steel while at the same time ensuring that the EU market stays open to fair and sustainable competition where EU importers can se-

cure supply at competitive prices.

As always, steel sourced within the EU is not subject to any such tariffs as part of the Single Market.

Departmental Data

140. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of staff by location and function in each office of his Department nationally; if the property is State owned or leased; and the detail of these leases in the case of those properties on a lease in terms of cost, term and next break date. [38850/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The table below lists the number of staff in each office/building of my Department by function and location, nationally. The Office of Public Works (OPW) manages the State's property portfolio on behalf of my Department. In respect of the accommodation occupied by the Department and its Offices, the State owns the Kildare Street, Dawson Street, Lansdowne House and Lower Hebron Road, Kilkenny buildings. The other buildings are leased and the specific lease arrangements are a matter for the OPW.

[Staff]

National Broadband Plan

141. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will provide details of the way new builds are incorporated into the National Broadband Plan if they do not have an Eircode at the time of initial rollout planning and are therefore not included in plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38716/21]

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 ensuring no premises is left behind. The NBP network will offer those premises in the Intervention Area a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. It was a requirement of the Contract to provide high speed broadband services to all premises in the Intervention Area, including new premises built over the lifetime of the Contract. Therefore, NBI will be required to both pass and connect new premises in the Intervention Area over the 25 year term of the Contract.

The NBP High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie shows the areas covered by the State led intervention as well as those targeted by commercial operators. The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led intervention. BLUE areas are not included in the State intervention area covered by the NBP, as commercial operators are already providing high speed broadband or have indicated future plans to do so. My Department defines high speed broadband as a connection with minimum speeds of 30Mbps download and 6Mbps upload. The activities of commercial operators delivering high speed broadband within BLUE areas are not planned or funded by the State and my Department has no statutory authority to intervene in

that regard.

An Post collects information on new and existing buildings, as well as changes to existing addresses, and Ordnance Survey Ireland provides the geo-locations for these buildings. An Post GeoDirectory issues a new release of the GeoDirectory database file on a quarterly basis to the Department which enables a process to update the NBP map to take account of new builds in the intervention area. Any new premises that is captured in the GeoDirectory file that is located within the geographic area of the intervention area will be captured in the scope for the NBI rollout regardless of whether an eircode has been assigned.

National Broadband Plan

142. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will address a matter in which a number of properties are struggling to get connection to adequate broadband and the installation date has been pushed back by National Broadband Ireland (details supplied). [38771/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): The Question refers to a premises located in the AMBER area on the National Broadband Plan (NBP) High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led intervention.

I appreciate people's frustration when they are living so close to a fibre network but cannot obtain a connection to that network, particularly given the heightened importance of connectivity during the Covid-19 pandemic. The NBP will ensure that in all such cases a future proofed high speed broadband network will be built to serve these premises and work to deliver on this is underway.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) that, as of 8 July, over 233,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Surveys are complete or underway in County Westmeath in Mullingar, Sonna, Stonehall, Taghmon, Jamestown, Hopestown, and Athlone. Pre-works have commenced in the areas around Mullingar. NBI has advised that surveying is underway in the area where the premises referred to is located and they anticipate that high speed broadband should be available for connection in the first half of 2022.

Further details are available on specific areas within County Westmeath through the NBI website which provides a facility for any premises within the intervention area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website www.nbi.ie. Individuals who register with this facility will receive regular updates on progress by NBI on delivering the network and specific updates related to their own premises as works commence. NBI also has a dedicated email address, reps@nbi.ie which can be used by Oireachtas members for specific queries.

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 to aspects of the programme. Impacts include challenges with mobilisation of key contractors, restrictions on operations, supply chain and logistic delays (both nationally and internationally). Covid 19 has affected 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 staffs 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.

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 8 July, 335 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible sites and the Department of Education for school BCPs. BCP's are connected at Whitehall Community Centre, Streete Parish Park & Community Hall, Milltown Emper Community Centre, Ballycomoye GAA Club, and Clonkill Hurling Club. Further details can be found at nbi.ie/bcp-locations/ .

Scoil Náisiúnta Bhríde and Naomh Micheal have been installed by NBI for educational access. My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise schools with no high speed broadband, within the Intervention Area, for connection over the term of the NBP. In this regard, an acceleration of this aspect of the National Broadband Plan was announced in December which will see some 679 primary schools connected to high speed broadband by 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframe of 2026. Further details are available on the NBI website at nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/ .

Departmental Schemes

143. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of warmer home scheme applications received, completed and disallowed in the past five years in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38781/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme is funded by my Department and administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). The scheme delivers a range of energy efficiency measures free of charge to low income households vulnerable to energy poverty. To date over 143,000 homes have received free upgrades under the scheme, leaving the occupants better able to afford to heat their homes to an adequate level. The approximate average value of the energy efficiency measures provided to households under the Better Energy Warmer Homes scheme was €14,800 in 2020. A total of €221.5 million in capital funding has been provided for SEAI residential and community retrofit schemes in 2021. Of this amount, €109 million is provided to support lower income households to retrofit their homes, with €100 million allocated to the Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme. This represents an increase of €47 million on the 2020 allocation for energy poverty schemes and means that almost half of the total SEAI residential and community retrofit budget will support people vulnerable to energy poverty. The funding will mean that more households can receive free energy efficiency upgrades making their homes warmer, healthier and cheaper to run, in line with the Programme for Government.

The information requested by the Deputy in relation to the number of warmer home scheme applications received, completed and ineligible in the past five years has been provided by the SEAI and is set out in the Table below:

Warmer Homes Scheme	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021**

New applications	12,863	7,408	5,682	2,858	1,401
Homes completed	6,554	5,255	3,142	1,524	563
Ineligible applications***			324*	276	240

* Data from mid-2019 only due to new system implementation. Historical data not available.

**2021 figures to end June 2021.

***The SEAI uses the term “ineligible” rather than “disallowed” to classify applications which were not successful in meeting the eligibility requirements of the scheme.

It is important to note that the number of retrofits last year were unfortunately, negatively impacted by COVID-19 related restrictions. Enhanced COVID restrictions between January and April also had a significant impact on activity this year. Every effort is being made to maximise activity now that construction activity in the residential sector has recommenced.

Departmental Schemes

144. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he has lifted the restriction which applies to persons getting a second round of support under the warmer homes scheme in cases in which the previous support had only been for shallow measures such as roof insulation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38797/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme delivers a range of energy efficiency measures free of charge to low income households vulnerable to energy poverty. In order to qualify for support, applicants must own and live in their home which was built and occupied before 2006 and must be in receipt of certain social welfare payments.

To date, over 143,000 homes have received free upgrades under the scheme, leaving the occupants better able to afford to heat their homes to an adequate level. There are currently over 7,800 homes on the Warmer Homes work programme and the scheme operates nationally on a first come, first serve basis. These homes have not previously received any free upgrades under the scheme and for that reason are the priority to receive upgrades. Recommendations on the implementation of changes to the scheme to better target those most in need will be finalised shortly.

The total budget for energy poverty schemes in 2021 is €109 million with €100 million allocated to the Warmer Homes Scheme. This represents a €47 million increase for the scheme when compared to 2020. In addition to the increased budget allocation, delivery capacity has increased due to a new, broader contractor panel that commenced at the end of 2020. I have also secured additional resources this year to expand the capacity of the SEAI to deliver the scheme.

Departmental Data

145. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communi-

cations the number of staff by location and function in each office of his Department nationally by location; if the property is State owned or leased; and the detail of these leases in the case of those properties on a lease in terms of cost, term and next break date. [38855/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department currently operates from the following locations:

Office Location	Number of Staff
29/31 Adelaide Road, Dublin 2. D02 X285	280
Tom Johnson House, Beggars Bush, Dublin 4. D04 K7X4	74
Elm House, Earlsvale Road, Cavan. H12 A8H7	40
Government Offices, Newtown Road, Wexford. Y35 AP90	37

The procurement and management of office accommodation for my Department is carried out by the Office of Public Works.

National Broadband Plan

146. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of a broadband connection for a household (details supplied) in an amber zone in the national broadband roll-out plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38871/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): The Question refers to a premises located in the AMBER area on the National Broadband Plan (NBP) High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led intervention.

I appreciate people's frustration when they are living so close to a fibre network but cannot obtain a connection to that network, particularly given the heightened importance of connectivity during the Covid-19 pandemic. The NBP will ensure that in all such cases a future proofed high speed broadband network will be built to serve these premises and work to deliver on this is underway.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) that, as of 8 July, over 233,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Surveys are complete or underway in County Cork in the areas of Midleton, Cullen, Templebreedy, Carrigaline, Ballyfoyle, Douglas, Ballyphehane, Glasheen, Mahon, Kilpatrick, Ballydesmond, Kiskeam, Umeraboy, Knocknagree, Rineen, Cullen, Coolinarna, Millstreet, Hollymount and Caherbarnagh. Main works are ongoing in Carrigaline, Fountainstown, Ballinhassig, Monkstown, and Upper Rochestown. Preworks are ongoing in Midleton.

The first fibre to the home connections are successfully connected in Cavan and in Carrigaline, County Cork. I am advised by NBI that, as of 8 July nearly 6,600 homes are passed and available for connection in Counties Cork, Cavan and now Galway. A further 13,000 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.

Further details are available on specific areas within County Cork through the NBI website which provides a facility for any premises within the intervention area to register their inter-

est in being provided with deployment updates through its website www.nbi.ie. Individuals who register with this facility will receive regular updates on progress by NBI on delivering the network and specific updates related to their own premises as works commence. NBI has a dedicated email address, reps@nbi.ie, which can be used by Oireachtas members for specific queries.

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of 8 July, 335 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible sites and the Department of Education for school BCPs. BCP's are connected at Laharn Heritage Centre, Ballindangan Community Centre, Whitechurch Community Centre, Clogagh Community Hall, T.O. Park Labbamollaga, Bere Island Heritage Centre, Sherkin Island Community Hall (8.06km from premises), Glash Community Centre, Ballydaly Community Hall, Aubane Community Centre, Mealagh Valley Community Centre, Coláiste Phobal Cléire (1.64km from premises), Lissavard Community Centre, Aghabullogue Community Centre, and Castletownkenneigh Community Centre. Further details can be found at nbi.ie/bcp-locations/.

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

Telecommunications Services

147. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the average 4G coverage across the State; the average 4G coverage for each county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39010/21]

Minister of State at the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Ossian Smyth): The provision of telecommunication services, including mobile phone and broadband services, is a matter for the relevant service providers operating in a fully liberalised market regulated by the Commission for Communication Regulation (ComReg), as independent Regulator. Obligations in relation to mobile coverage are set out in licences granted by Comreg to the mobile operators and ComReg advises that the current minimum coverage obligations are being exceeded considerably by all operators. ComReg is currently managing the next spectrum award process for wireless broadband services and commissioned studies and technical reports to inform its approach to the award process and the consideration of appropriate coverage and rollout obligations in that context. These studies are available at www.comreg.ie.

In relation to mobile coverage, ComReg has developed a national outdoor coverage map (available at [this link](#)), which can help consumers choose the network provider that best meets their needs for where they live, work and travel. ComReg has also published the results of tests carried out on mobile/smartphone handsets currently available in Ireland (available at [this link](#)). These findings will further allow consumers to make informed decisions based on the handsets which best address their needs.

Departmental Schemes

148. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of persons that have received energy upgrades as part of the better energy warmer homes scheme since 2020 on a county basis; the number of applicants in the same time period on a county basis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39011/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme is funded by my Department and administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). The scheme delivers a range of energy efficiency measures free of charge to low income households vulnerable to energy poverty. To date over 143,000 homes have received free upgrades under the scheme, leaving the occupants better able to afford to heat their homes to an adequate level. The approximate average value of the energy efficiency measures provided to households under the Better Energy Warmer Homes scheme was €14,800 in 2020. A total of €221.5 million in capital funding has been provided for SEAI residential and community retrofit schemes in 2021. Of this amount, €109 million is provided to support lower income households to retrofit their homes, with €100 million allocated to the Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme. This represents an increase of €47 million on the 2020 allocation for energy poverty schemes and means that almost half of the total SEAI residential and community retrofit budget will support people vulnerable to energy poverty. The funding will mean that more households can receive free energy efficiency upgrades making their homes warmer, healthier and cheaper to run, in line with the Programme for Government.

The information requested by the Deputy in relation to the number of applicants, and the number of applicants that have received energy upgrades as part of the better energy warmer homes scheme since 2020 on a county basis has been provided by the SEAI and is set out in the Table below:

			Applica- tions			Works Completed
County	2020	2021	Total	2020	2021	Total
Co. Carlow	31	29	60	11	8	19
Co. Cavan	45	23	68	22	18	40
Co. Clare	59	29	88	22	6	28
Co. Cork	292	146	438	142	54	196
Co. Donegal	164	62	226	87	22	109
Co. Dublin	690	341	1,031	504	176	680
Co. Galway	161	75	236	86	10	96
Co. Kerry	94	53	147	55	10	65
Co. Kildare	79	40	119	40	19	59
Co. Kilkenny	41	20	61	20	12	32
Co. Laois	27	24	51	11	6	17
Co. Leitrim	31	11	42	17	3	20
Co. Limerick	94	47	141	16	9	25
Co. Longford	38	14	52	13	8	21
Co. Louth	63	32	95	26	22	48
Co. Mayo	182	67	249	68	12	80
Co. Meath	106	58	164	60	19	79

Co. Monaghan	31	25	56	14	6	20
Co. Offaly	51	29	80	42	11	53
Co. Roscommon	63	28	91	33	19	52
Co. Sligo	47	21	68	27	10	37
Co. Tipperary	126	47	173	22	14	36
Co. Waterford	84	38	122	42	24	66
Co. Westmeath	81	41	122	39	15	54
Co. Wexford	97	63	160	74	38	112
Co. Wicklow	81	38	119	31	12	43
Grand Total	2,858	1,401	4,259	1,524	563	2,087

Note: 2021 data is to end-June 2021

It is important to note that the number of retrofits last year were unfortunately, negatively impacted by COVID-19 related restrictions. Enhanced COVID restrictions between January and April also had a significant impact on activity this year. Every effort is being made to maximise activity now that construction activity in the residential sector has recommenced.

National Broadband Plan

149. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the National Broadband Plan in County Mayo; the number of premises connected to date; the target for the end of 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39020/21]

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 84,299 premises in County Mayo of which 47,684 are in the commercial area and 36,615 are within the NBP Intervention Area. I am advised by National Broadband Ireland that, as of 8 July, over 233,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed including 8,281 premises in Co Mayo. Surveys are completed or ongoing in the areas of Aghagower, Ballyhean, Breaghwy, Burren, Castlebar, Clogher, Cloonkeen, Croaghmoyle, Islandeady, Killavally, Manulla, Pontoon, Strade, Tawnynagry, Turlough, Drumsheen, Bunnyconnellan, Ballina Town, Carrowntreila, Ardagh, Campbells Crossroads, Rosserk, Shanvoley, Derryhick, Kilhale, Tawnylaheen, Turlough, Ballyvary, Keeloges, Castlebar Town, Rinnaseer, Bellaburke, Killawullaun Mountain, Carn, Carnacon, Ballyglass, Belcarra, Balla and Ringarraun, Newport, Carrowbeg, Inishgort, Inishcottle, Myna, Fahy, Ashbridge, Glenisland, Srahmore, Glenhest, Comploon, Slogger and Tawnameeltoge.

Build works are currently underway in the Deployment Area that covers Castlebar and surrounding townlands including Turlough, Ballyhean, Clooneen, Kilhale, Tawnylaheen and Burren. I am advised by NBI that it expects some 2,100 premises in these areas to be passed and available for connection by early 2022.

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 Mayo 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.

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 8 July, 335 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 include Bofeenaun Community Centre, Killaser Community Centre, Keel Community Centre, Taugheen Community Centre, Kilmovee Community Centre, Finny Community Centre, Islandeady Community Centre, Cushlough Community Centre, Clare Island Community Centre, The Black Tom Freeman Sport And Community Amenities Centre and Belderrig Community & Research Centre.

Midfield National School, Rathnamagh National School, Dooagh National School, Valley National School, Dookinella National School, Scoil Néifinn, Tavraun Central National School, Errew National School, Facefield National School, Gortskehy National School, Kinaffe National School, Meelick More National School, Saint Coleman's National School, Cloghans National School, Shraigh National School and Rathbane National School are also installed as part of this initiative. My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise schools with no high speed broadband, within the Intervention Area, for connection over the term of the NBP. In this regard, an acceleration of this aspect of the National Broadband Plan 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 nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/.

Covid-19 Pandemic

150. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Transport if an EU Digital COVID Certificate will be provided to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38752/21]

151. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Transport if an EU Digital COVID Certificate will be provided to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38753/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 150 and 151 together.

Arrangements for the production and issue of the EU Digital Covid Certificates are being

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progressed by the Department of Health, the HSE and the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer. Questions on these matters should be addressed to the relevant Minister.

Question No. 151 answered with Question No. 150.

Driver Test

152. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport if he will provide a timetable for clearing the backlog in driver test waiting times. [38779/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The driving test is the statutory responsibility of the Road Safety Authority.

The information requested is held by the Authority and this question 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.

Departmental Schemes

153. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Transport if there are financial supports available for the establishment of a taxi service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38820/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The administration of financial supports for the SPSV sector, which includes measures such as the Wheelchair Accessible Vehicle grant which supports the purchase of new wheelchair accessible vehicles, is a matter for the statutory regulator, the National Transport Authority. In view of the Authority's responsibilities in the matter I have forwarded your question to the Authority for direct reply to you. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Driver Licences

154. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Transport if an Irish driver licence can issue to a person (details supplied) resident here who already holds a full UK licence based on passing a driving test in Kenya; if not, the reason it cannot issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38865/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): Ireland has entered into a licence exchange agreement with the UK so that a UK/NI driving licence can be exchanged for an Irish licence and vice versa. There is an exception to this exchange set out in the agreement. A UK/NI licence category will not be exchanged in Ireland where the licence category originated from a third country whose licences are not accepted for exchange in Ireland.

Ireland does not have a licence exchange agreement with Kenya.

Irish driver licensing law operates within a framework of EU law, which sets out the driver licensing legislation with which all Member States must comply. The format of driving licences, categories of vehicles, and the standards to be met in driving tests to qualify for a licence,

are all set at EU level. A Member State may exchange a driving licence issued by a third country (e.g. Kenya) but another Member State does not have to mutually recognise such a licence.

Driver licensing exists in the interests of public safety and is in essence about ensuring that people licensed to drive on our roads have reached certain recognised standards. When people come to Ireland with a non-exchangeable licence, we have no option but to require them to go through the process of obtaining an Irish licence. While many may have a safe driving record, we have no way of measuring that the standards have been met.

Driver Test

155. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Transport if, in view of the unusual circumstances of a person (details supplied), a driver theory and practical test could be expedited from the date given; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38866/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): Ireland has entered into a licence exchange agreement with the UK so that a UK/NI driving licence can be exchanged for an Irish licence and vice versa. There is an exception to this exchange agreement. A UK/NI licence category will not be exchanged in Ireland where the licence category originated from a third country whose licences are not accepted for exchange in Ireland.

For example, if a UK licence was issued in exchange for a Kenyan licence, Ireland does not have a licence exchange agreement with Kenya and so the UK licence cannot be exchanged here.

The Driver Theory Test Service has now re-opened on a gradual basis with a maximum monthly capacity of 25,000 tests initially.

This means that while there are currently over 25,000 customers with an appointment for a Theory Test in July, some appointments will be rescheduled to a later date. Customers who cannot be accommodated in July because of volume restrictions will have to be rescheduled.

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.

As Minister, I cannot address individual cases but, given the circumstances, I am referring this to the RSA for direct reply.

Driver Licences

156. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Transport the details of the plan to expand driver lessons to non-essential workers; the expected timeline for the plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38935/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): Road safety policy during the pandemic has depended on public health decisions taken by Government, on the advice of the National Public Health Emergency Team.

There is currently no legal impediment to the provision of driving lessons, provided public health guidelines are adhered to. However, the position is that these lessons can resume where the learner in question is willing to book a class and the instructor is willing to teach it. It does

not mean that instruction has to resume, or that driving instructors are obliged to teach against their will.

However, as the Deputy will be aware, approved Driving Instructors (ADIS) are entirely independent operators and neither the Road Safety Authority nor the Department can dictate how they run their individual businesses. It is up to each driving instructor or driving school to make the appropriate choices to protect themselves and their families.

Rail Network

157. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Transport when a decision will be made on the reopening of the Athenry to Claremorris section of the Western Rail Corridor; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39028/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy may know, in January my Department published both Iarnród Éireann's financial and economic appraisal (the "EY Report") and the independent review of it that had been commissioned by my Department and conducted by JASPERS, an agency of the European Investment Bank/EU Commission.

This independent review noted a number of shortcomings in relation to the proposed reopening of the Western Rail Corridor Phases 2 and 3 as presented, in particular around issues such as the need to demonstrate the strategic role of the proposal and how it sat within the broader proposed development of the network.

Government noted the conclusions of both the EY Report and the JASPERS Review in December 2020 and also noted my intention to launch a Strategic Rail Review of the rail network. This Review will be conducted in co-operation with colleagues in the Department for Infrastructure (Northern Ireland) and will examine 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 such as the Western Rail Corridor.

My Department launched the procurement process in April and has now identified a preferred bidder. I expect work on the Review to commence following the summer and the Review itself is scheduled to be completed within 12 months.

Rail Network

158. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport the updated timeframe for the delivery of the MetroLink; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39038/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy is likely aware, the Public Spending Code sets out the requirements for the evaluation, planning and management of public investment projects in Ireland and the Code applies to all public bodies and to all bodies whose projects are supported by Exchequer capital funding.

The Code sets out a number of Decision Gates in the development of a project proposal; these are points where major decisions need to be made about the progress of a project and, for projects expected to cost over €100million, Government approval is required at these Decision Gates. For a project in this category, "Decision Gate 1: Approval in Principle" is the first stage where the Public Spending Code stipulates that formal Government approval is required.

In accordance with the Public Spending Code's requirements, the National Transport Au-

thority has submitted MetroLink's Preliminary Business Case to my Department. The Code stipulates that it must be reviewed by both my Department and the Department for Public Expenditure and Reform. Following completion of these necessary steps I will then bring the matter to Government for its decision.

Approval under "Decision Gate 1: Approval in Principle" is required prior to any application to An Bord Pleanála for a Railway Order. It is anticipated that, subject to Government approval and completion of the necessary planning and environmental documentation, an application will be made to An Bord Pleanála this year.

I would note that this is the first of three Government Decision Gates and, if approved by Government at Decision Gate 1, then "Decision Gate 2: Pre-Tender Approval" requires submission of a Detailed Project Brief and Procurement Strategy which will be considered at that juncture, while finally "Decision Gate 3: Approval to Proceed" requires submission of a Final Business Case to allow substantive construction to commence.

Rail Network

159. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport the current projected timeframe for construction works to commence electrification of the northern commuter line in order to extend the DART to Balbriggan; the current projected timeframe for the DART to Balbriggan to be completed and open for passengers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39039/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy is likely aware, the Public Spending Code sets out the requirements for the evaluation, planning and management of public investment projects in Ireland and the Code applies to all public bodies and to all bodies whose projects are supported by Exchequer capital funding.

The Code sets out a number of Decision Gates in the development of a project proposal; these are points where major decisions need to be made about the progress of a project and, for projects expected to cost over €100million, Government approval is required at these Decision Gates. For a project in this category, "Decision Gate 1: Approval in Principle" is the first stage where the Public Spending Code stipulates that formal Government approval is required.

In accordance with the Public Spending Code's requirements, the National Transport Authority has submitted the DART+ Preliminary Business Case to my Department. The Code stipulates that it must be reviewed by both my Department and the Department for Public Expenditure and Reform. Following completion of these necessary steps I will then bring the matter to Government for its decision.

Approval under "Decision Gate 1: Approval in Principle" is required prior to any application to An Bord Pleanála for a Railway Order. I would note that this is the first of three Government Decision Gates and, if approved by Government at Decision Gate 1, then "Decision Gate 2: Pre-Tender Approval" requires submission of a Detailed Project Brief and Procurement Strategy which will be considered at that juncture, while finally "Decision Gate 3: Approval to Proceed" requires submission of a Final Business Case to allow substantive construction to commence.

DART+ is a programme comprised of five principal elements - DART+ West, DART+ South West, DART+ Coastal North (as referred to by the Deputy), DART+ Coastal South and DART+ Fleet. DART+ West and DART+ Fleet are the two elements most advanced at this stage with Government decisions expected in respect of both expected this year, while approval stages in

respect of the other elements of the programme to follow thereafter.

Greenways Provision

160. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department has provided funding for the Santry river greenway; the projected timeline for the commencement and completion of works on the greenway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39040/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy is likely aware, the Programme for Government committed that approximately €360 million in cross-Government funding will be spent on walking and cycling per annum over the lifetime of the Government. This investment will help support the delivery of around 1,000 kilometres of improved walking and cycling infrastructure by 2025 as well as additional investment in Greenways.

I was delighted to announce earlier this year an allocation of €240 million to Active Travel projects in the Greater Dublin Area and the regional cities, along with an additional €72.8 million to projects in the other local authorities. As part of this €240 million, Dublin City Council was allocated just under €50 million in 2021 for the development of walking and cycling infrastructure and a full list of projects to be progressed this year is available at www.nationaltransport.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/2021-Issued-Allocations-Final.pdf.

As Minister, I have responsibility for the development of policy and provision of funding in relation to Active Travel. The National Transport Authority (NTA), meanwhile, has the responsibility of allocation of funding to specific projects and oversight of their development, in cooperation with the local authorities themselves. Given their responsibility in this area, I have referred your question about the Santry Greenway to the NTA for a more detailed reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Driver Licences

161. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if he plans to change the power of a motorbike a driver can operate with a full category B car licence and initial basic training to bring the rules into line with similar requirements in Europe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39043/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): Irish driver licensing law operates within a framework of EU law, which sets out the driver licensing legislation with which all Member States must comply. The format of driving licences, categories of vehicles, and the standards to be met in driving tests to qualify for a licence, are all set at EU level. Irish licensing law is in line with EU requirements.

Under the EU Directives, a Member State may provide for category A1 motorcycles under a licence for category B, which would only be valid for driving on their territory. It is not my intention to provide this provision. Initial basic training must be completed and a motorcycle driving test must be passed for all motorcycle categories. The continuing toll of fatal and serious accidents on our roads means we cannot compromise on ensuring all road users are as safe as possible.

Driver Licences

162. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the fact that some persons have been left out of pocket as a result of the recent extension of the expiration date for driver licences due to the fact that many persons obtained a medical examination to renew their driver licence but now cannot do so and will need to pay to obtain another medical examination in advance of renewing their licence in ten months' time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39044/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): Ireland received authorisation from the EU to extend driving licences that expire between 1 July and 31 October 2021 for an additional 10 months. This extension was granted under EU Regulation 2021/267 and was applied on 2 July 2021. A copy of the Regulation can be found on the European Union Law website:

eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32021R0267&qid=1625569643896 .

When the extension is applied, the expiry date on the driver file for each person affected is updated to the new expiry date. By law, a driving licence cannot be renewed more than 3 months before the expiry of the licence.

The Deputy will appreciate that the requirement to submit a medical report dated not more than one month prior to the application is to ensure that the most up-to-date assessment of the applicant is provided.

I am aware that some people seeking to renew their licences may have obtained medical certificates that are no longer required, owing to the extension of their licences. However, for all classes of licence where a medical certificate is required, it is the applicant's responsibility to provide this and there is no mechanism to reimburse individual applicants.

Tax Reliefs

163. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to proposals from a group (details supplied) regarding income tax relief for owner-occupiers and VAT rebates for social landlords; his plans to implement these measures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38778/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy will be aware, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, has established an Independent Working Group to examine the issue of defective housing. Officials from my Department participate in this Working Group. The objectives of the group are to identify the scope of relevant significant defects in housing, to evaluate the scale of housing affected, to propose a means of prioritising defects, to evaluate the cost of remediation, to recommend appropriate mechanisms for resolving defects and, to consider financing options in line with the Programme for Government commitment to identifying options for those impacted by defects to access low-cost, long-term finance.

My attention has been drawn to the proposals referred to by the Deputy. Generally, proposals for such measures are assessed in accordance with my Department's Tax Expenditure Guidelines. These make clear that it is important that any policy proposal which involves tax expenditures should only occur in limited circumstances, for example where there are demonstrable market failures. In particular, they provide that a tax-based incentive should only be considered where it would be more efficient than a direct expenditure intervention. The introduction of such measures is a matter that would fall to be considered in the context of Budget

2022 and the subsequent Finance Bill.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

164. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Finance if travel agents will be able to avail of the Covid-19 restrictions support scheme payment into the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38913/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS) is a targeted support for businesses significantly impacted by restrictions introduced by the Government under public health regulations to combat the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The support is available to companies, self-employed individuals and partnerships who carry on a trade or trading activities, the profits from which are chargeable to tax under Case I of Schedule D, from a business premises located in a region subject to restrictions introduced in line with the Living with Covid-19 Plan.

Details of CRSS were published in Finance Act 2020 and detailed operational guidelines, which are based on the terms and conditions of the scheme as set out in the legislation, have been published on the Revenue website.

The CRSS applies to businesses carrying on trading activities from a business premises located in a region subject to restrictions, which requires the business to prohibit or considerably restrict customers from accessing their business premises and as a result, is operating at less than 25% of turnover in 2019.

It is not sufficient that the trade of a business has been impacted because of a reduction in customer demand as a consequence of Covid-19. The scheme only applies where, as a direct result of the specific terms of the Government restrictions, the business is required to either prohibit or significantly restrict access to its business premises. This means that in the case of a travel agent that operates from a business premises, they may qualify for support under the scheme provided they meet all the eligibility criteria, including the requirement that customers are either prohibited, or significantly restricted, from accessing their business premises under the public health regulations.

As non-essential retail, including travel agent businesses, were permitted to open from 17 May 2021, they are no longer subject to Covid restrictions which would require them to prohibit or significantly restrict customers from accessing their business premises. Therefore, from that date, they ceased to qualify for support under the CRSS. However, subject to meeting the relevant criteria, a business such as a travel agent business, reopening after a period of restrictions, may claim a "restart week payment" under the CRSS scheme to assist it with the costs of reopening.

For businesses reopening between 29 April 2021 and 1 June 2021, an "enhanced restart week payment" may be claimed, which is computed at double the normal weekly CRSS rate, for two weeks, subject to a maximum weekly amount payable of €5,000.

On 1 June, I announced that an additional business support scheme, the Business Resumption Support Scheme (BRSS), would be available for businesses whose turnover in the period from 1 September 2020 to 31 August 2021 is reduced by 75% compared with their 2019 turnover. To qualify under the scheme, a business must carry on a trade or trading activities, the profits from which are chargeable to tax under Case I of Schedule D. The BRSS will come into operation from early September. Under the scheme, a qualifying business will be able to claim a cash payment calculated as three times the sum of 10% of their average weekly turnover up to

€20,000 and 5% on any excess of average weekly turnover above €20,000, subject to a maximum payment under the scheme of €15,000.

Companies and self-employed individuals may be entitled to support under other measures put in place by Government, including the COVID Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS). Businesses may also be eligible to warehouse VAT and PAYE (Employer) debts and also excess payments received by employers under the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, and the balance of Income Tax for 2019 and Preliminary Tax for 2020 for self-assessed taxpayers if applicable.

The Government will continue to assess the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy and I will continue to work with my Ministerial colleagues to ensure that appropriate supports are in place to mitigate these effects.

Departmental Schemes

165. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Finance if consideration will be given to extending the help to buy scheme to first-time buyers who wish to buy second hand properties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38818/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Help to Buy (HTB) incentive is a scheme to assist first-time purchasers with obtaining the deposit they need to buy or build a new house or apartment. The scheme gives a refund on Income Tax and Deposit Interest Retention Tax (DIRT) paid in the State over the previous four years, subject to limits outlined in the legislation.

An increase in the supply of new housing is fundamental to resolving the current housing crisis. One of the main aims of the policy underpinning the design of HTB was to help encourage the building of additional new properties. By restricting the scheme solely to new dwellings and new self-builds, it is anticipated that the resulting increase in demand for new build homes will encourage the construction of an additional supply of such properties. HTB was enhanced in July 2020 as part of the July Stimulus package last year and its duration was extended in Finance Bill 2020. These developments were in line with the commitment in the Programme for Government regarding the measure.

In relation to second-hand properties generally, an increase in the supply of new housing remains a priority aim of Government policy. As mentioned above, the HTB scheme is specifically designed to encourage an increase in demand for new build homes in order to encourage the construction of an additional supply of such properties. A move to include second-hand properties within the scope of the relief would not improve the effectiveness of the relief; on the contrary, it could serve to dilute the incentive effect of the measure in terms of encouraging additional supply.

In the normal course of events, the future of the scheme, beyond its current sunset date of 31 December 2021, is a matter that would fall to be considered by Government in the context of Budget 2022 and the subsequent Finance Bill.

Departmental Data

166. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Finance the number of staff by location and function in each office of his Department nationally by location; if the property is State

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owned or leased; and the detail of these leases in the case of those properties on a lease in terms of cost, term and next break date. [38851/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I wish to advise the Deputy that at 12 July 2021, my Department had the following number of staff in the following locations:

- 14/16 Merrion St – **72**
- Miesian Plaza, Baggot St – **49**
- Government Buildings, North Block – **13**
- Government Buildings, South Block – **184**
- Unit 2, Central Business Park, Clonminch Rd, Tullamore – **17**

A detailed breakdown by grade is attached.

I can confirm that South Block of Government Buildings and 14-16 Merrion Street are State-owned buildings.

However, in relation to those buildings which are partially occupied by Department of Finance staff (Miesian Plaza and Tullamore), my Department does not hold information regarding the detail of the leases of those properties in terms of cost, term, and next break date . This information is the responsibility of the OPW.

Department of Finance

14-16 Merrion St

PO - 6

AP - 15

AO - 22

HEO – 2

EO – 6

CO – 4

Service Officer/Attendant – 17

TOTAL: 72

Miesian Plaza, Baggot St

ASec – 2

PO - 5

AP - 13

AO - 16

HEO – 3

EO – 2

CO –1

Specialist - 7

TOTAL: 49

Government Buildings, North Block, Merrion St

PO - 1

AP - 1

AO - 1

HEO –1

EO – 2

CO – 7

TOTAL: 13

Government Buildings, South Block, Merrion St

Sec Gen – 1

ASec – 5

PO - 17

AP - 51

AO - 49

HEO – 14

EO – 18

CO – 29

TOTAL: 184

Unit 2, Central Business Park, Clonminch Rd, Tullamore

AP - 2

HEO – 3

EO – 3

CO – 9

TOTAL: 17

Tax Code

167. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance when a determination on the requests for reforms requested by the Tax Appeals Commission in March 2021 will be decided

upon; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39049/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): It is assumed that the Deputy is referring to the proposal by the Chairperson of the Tax Appeals Commission (TAC) for a new tiered structure of Appeal Commissioners. I am conscious that an effective, transparent and fair tax appeals system for taxpayers is an essential aspect of any tax system, and therefore it is important to ensure that the Commission is provided with the appropriate resources so that it may best address the caseload it faces.

The TAC was established in March 2016 by the Finance (Tax Appeals) Act 2015 as part of a restructuring of the appeals process. The vision for the TAC was that it would provide enhanced arrangements for an independent, efficient, well-defined and transparent system for appeals relating to decisions of the Revenue Commissioners.

It has become clear that there is a significant range in both the value and complexity of the appeals received by the TAC and, in March of this year, the Chairperson of the TAC submitted a proposal to my Department to introduce a new tiered structure of Appeal Commissioners, to be responsible for appeals of differing value and/or complexity. This would allow for a more cost-effective allocation of resources within the TAC, and thereby should improve the efficacy of the appeal system for taxpayers. I have approved this proposal and my officials have been engaging with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to secure the necessary sanctions for the new structure. The sanctions were agreed this week, and the steps necessary to commence recruitment are now being undertaken.

Tax Appeals Commission

168. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance the number of tax appeals taken to the Tax Appeals Commission; the number determined; the number of cases settled before a determination was reached during each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39050/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): In response to the Deputy's question the following tables provide an outline of the number of appeals received and closed from 2016 to the end of June 2021 and the reason why each appeal was closed:

Appeals Received and Closed from 2016 to June 2021

Year	No. of Appeals Received	No. of Appeals Closed
2016	2,357	206
2017	1,747	689
2018	1,689	1,439
2019	1,494	1,579
2020	1,039	1,392
2021 (to end-June)	747	862
Total	9,073	6,167

Reason for Closures, 2016 to June 2021

How Closed	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021*	Total
Determinations Issued	14	37	45	119	191	97	503

How Closed	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021*	Total
Dismissed	1	41	162	95	16	89	404
Merged / Consolidated	1	17	17	4	6	1	46
Refused	55	7	325	180	63	87	717
Settled	96	410	667	729	509	293	2,704
Withdrawn by Appellant	39	177	223	452	607	295	1,793
Total	206	689	1,439	1,579	1,392	862	6,167

*2021 figures are to end June 2021 only.

While an appeal is being progressed by the Commission, at any time before a determination is issued, the Revenue Commissioners and Appellants are entitled to negotiate with each other to reach a settlement. This can occur for a number of reasons and the Commission is not a party to those negotiations or the reason for the settlement.

As an appeal is progressed, settlements can take place when additional information, sought by the Commission in advance of a determination being issued, is revealed to both parties giving a clearer understanding of how the tax dispute was arrived at. On other occasions, the additional requirements by the Commission to progress the appeal prompt parties to begin negotiations. Settlements can be a favourable outcome for the parties saving time and legal costs. The Commission can also close the appeal without the need to hear the appeal and draft a determination.

Once a determination is used by the Commission, the parties can then only appeal to the High Court on a point of law.

Tax Appeals Commission

169. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance the number of customers who put funds on account with the Revenue Commissioners while tax appeals are taken to the Tax Appeals Commission during each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39051/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that it is not in a position to provide the information requested by the Deputy as the data requested is not captured in a form that is readily accessible. Revenue obtains the information relating to the amount of tax that is ‘held under appeal’ from its IT systems. Outstanding tax liabilities are automatically identified by the presence of an appeal stop marker that is input to suspend the collection of the disputed tax, if not already paid, pending the determination of the appeal. Prior to an appeal being made to the Tax Appeals Commission, taxpayers can pay the amount of tax being disputed to prevent interest being applied if the taxpayer is unsuccessful in the appeal. Any protective payments made by a taxpayer are not identified as such on Revenue systems and are indiscernible from other payments made by them in a tax period. However, the records of each individual taxpayer fully reflect any payments by them.

Given the ‘point in time’ nature of the information contained in Revenue’s appeals data and other limitations, it is not possible to quantify the total amount prepaid relating to tax under appeal or the number of taxpayers who have prepaid monies that are in dispute. While Revenue has detailed information at an individual taxpayer level there is no systematic way of retrieving this information.

As the Deputy is aware, the Comptroller and Auditor General included a chapter on the Management of tax appeals in his 2019 Annual Report in which he noted that “Revenue is not in a position to quantify the total amount prepaid relating to tax under appeal ..., or how much in total was refunded by Revenue to taxpayers as a result of Revenue losing appeals”. The full chapter of the report is available at www.audit.gov.ie/en/find-report/publications/2020/2019-annual-report-chapter-14-management-of-tax-appeals.pdf.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

170. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the case of a person (details supplied); if will be referred matter to the Revenue Commissioners for a review and update; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39052/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS) is a targeted support for businesses significantly impacted by restrictions introduced by the Government under public health regulations to combat the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The support is available to companies, self-employed individuals and partnerships who carry on a trade or trading activities, the profits from which are chargeable to tax under Case I of Schedule D. The legislative basis for the scheme is set out in Finance Act 2020 and detailed operational guidelines, which are based on the terms and conditions of the scheme as set out in the legislation, are published on the Revenue website.

A qualifying business must operate from a business premises located in a region that is subject to restrictions introduced in line with the Government’s Living with COVID-19 Plan. For the purposes of the scheme, a business premises is defined as a building or other similar fixed physical structure from which a business activity is ordinarily carried on. Trading activities that are ordinarily carried on outside of a business premises are not eligible for the scheme.

I am advised by Revenue that the business in question was originally approved for the CRSS but on review was found to be ineligible because it does not conduct its operations from a business premises. Revenue accepts that repayment of the amount owed as a single payment could cause financial difficulty for the business and due to the exceptional circumstances involved will add the amount owed to its warehoused debt even though the Debt Warehousing Scheme does not specifically provide for CRSS related liabilities.

If the business disagrees with Revenue’s determination that it is not eligible for the scheme, it has the right to appeal the decision to the independent Tax Appeals Commission (TAC) within 30 days of receipt of the determination notice. Information and guidance on how to make an appeal to the TAC is available at www.taxappeals.ie.

You may also be aware of the Business Resumption Support Scheme which may be of interest to your constituent. The BRSS will be implemented in September 2021. This scheme is being introduced for vulnerable but viable businesses, particularly in sectors that were significantly impacted throughout the pandemic, even during periods when restrictions were eased. Businesses whose turnover is reduced by 75% in the reference period, 1 September 2020 to 31 August 2021, compared with 2019 will be eligible.

The scheme will not be restricted by location, rate-paying or physical premises. Businesses which previously availed of other schemes such as the small business assistance scheme for Covid and the tourism business continuity scheme, for example, as well as the Covid restrictions support scheme, will be eligible to apply for a once-off payment based on a percentage of their average weekly turnover for 2019, subject to a maximum payment of €15,000, provided

they meet the qualifying criteria.

Finally, Revenue has confirmed that the business is continuing to avail of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and the Debt Warehousing Scheme.

Tax Collection

171. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Finance if he will give consideration to the introduction of new arrangements for the collection of the vacant site levy whereby the Revenue Commissioners would take over responsibility for collection based on a self-certification system in order to bring these sites into use for housing development and in view of the inability of local authorities to collect these levies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39061/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): In the context of my reply to the Deputy's priority question regarding the Vacant Site Levy of 15 June 2021 (question number 32046/21) I indicated that I am giving consideration to the future of the Vacant Site Levy, its role and whether there is a case for it to be strengthened. On that occasion the Deputy mentioned a suggestion from a legal practitioner as to how to enhance the operation and effectiveness of the levy. I am advised that the proposal concerned was made to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage by a legal practitioner. My understanding is that the suggestion is to introduce an element of self-assessment under which the onus would lie on a landowner to register their site with the local authority and pay the Vacant Site Levy. The proposer considers that making the levy self-assessed would help to release residential land banks at reasonable prices and in turn enable builders to provide affordable homes. I am considering the issue in consultation with my colleague, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Options and approaches to address the housing challenge are continuously being assessed by the relevant Departments including my Department. I understand that this particular suggestion has been noted in the context of inter-Departmental discussions and will help to inform the deliberations on future actions.

Public Procurement Contracts

172. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if a review will be carried out into the reason a company (details supplied) which provides repair and re-resurfacing of kitchens, bathrooms, PVC windows and doors is not able to tender for work on the e-tenders portal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38821/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Office of Government Procurement (OGP) administers the Irish Government's national electronic tendering platform (eTenders). eTenders is a central facility for all public sector contracting authorities to advertise their procurement opportunities and award notices. eTenders is currently provided, managed and maintained on behalf of the OGP by a third party service provider.

The Government recognises the importance of access to public procurement opportunities to businesses, in particular to the SME sector, and access to eTenders is key enabler in that regard. The platform is freely accessible over the internet (@ www.etenders.gov.ie) and provides businesses and other interested parties, with a mechanism to register and create their own accounts and to subsequently view and access public procurement opportunities advertised therein. Registration and use of the service is free of charge to users.

There is guidance available on the platform to assist users in creating their eTenders accounts and accessing opportunities and one such guidance document can be found at the following link:

www.etenders.gov.ie/Media/Default/SiteContent/UserGuides/Supplier_Registration_Guide_October_2018.pdf

If any further assistance is required, there is also a support desk for the platform which can be contacted by telephone (021) 243 9277 or email (etenders@eu-supply.com) between 9.00am and 5.30pm Monday to Friday.

Public Sector Staff

173. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if compensation payments are made to retiring civil servants in respect of untaken annual leave in accordance with the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997; and if in each case such payments are treated as ex-gratia payments, free of PAYE deductions and so on. [38887/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): As per section 24 of **Circular 27/2003 - Annual Leave**, under the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997, it is illegal to pay an allowance in lieu of the minimum statutory annual leave entitlement of an officer unless the employment relationship is terminated, in which case the officer is entitled to payment for untaken annual leave accrued at the date of cessation of employment either by way of resignation, retirement or the death in service of the officer concerned.

In addition, Section 5 of **Circular 10/2012 - Resignations and Retirements Notice Period** instructs that every effort should be made to ensure that officers are facilitated in taking any annual leave entitlement (including carryover leave) in advance of their resignation/retirement date. The circular further notes that untaken leave may be taken as part of the overall notice requirement and that payment in lieu of annual leave should only be allowed in very exceptional cases.

Payment in respect of each day of untaken annual leave is subject to PAYE, PRSI and USC.

Departmental Data

174. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of staff by location and function in each office of his Department nationally by location; if the property is State owned or leased; and the detail of these leases in the case of those properties on a lease in terms of cost, term and next break date. [38860/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The information requested by the Deputy for my Department and the Office of Government Procurement, which is also part of my Department, is set out in the tables below. I wish to advise the Deputy that break clause details have not been included in the below tables as this information is considered to be commercially sensitive.

Questions - Written Answers

Office Location	Number of Staff	Functions	Office leased or owned	Lease details
Government Buildings, Upper Merrion Street, Dublin 2, D02 R583.	154	Government Spending, Public Service Reform, Corporate Office, Offices of the Minister, the Minister of State, the Secretary General and the Press Office	State owned	-
7-9 Merrion Row, Dublin 2, D02 V223.	138	Government Spending and Corporate Office	State owned	-
Ground floor, 3 Mayor Street Upper, Spencer Dock, Dublin 1, D01 WP44	77	Office of Government Chief Information Office (OGCIO)	Leased	Term: 20 years Expiry: 10th May 2035 Cost: €403,593 per annum
Miesian Plaza, 50-58 Miesian Plaza, Dublin 2, D02 XW14.	41	Government Spending	Leased	Term: 25 years Expiry: 21st December 2041 Cost: €494,901 per annum
90 North King St, Smithfield, Dublin 7, D07 N7CV.	14	Office of the Chief Medical Officer (CMO), which incorporates the Civil Service Occupational Health Department (CSOHD)	Leased	Term: 20 years Expiry: 21st March 2028 Cost: €148,886 per annum
St Stephen's Green House, Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 PH42.	30	Public Service Reform and Civil Service employee assistance service	Leased	Term: 30 years Expiry: 31st March 2026 Cost: €44,197 per annum- Term: 6 years Expiry: 31st March 2026 Cost: €453,000 per annum

Office Location	Number of Staff	Functions	Office leased or owned	Lease details
Block 2, Central Business Park, Clonminch Road, Tullamore, Co Offaly, R35 W7A4.	4	Internal and EU Audit	State owned	-

Office of Government Procurement

Office Location	Number of Staff	Functions	Office leased or owned	Lease details
4th & 5th Floor, 3 Mayor Street Upper, Spencer Dock, Dublin 1, D01 WP44	182	Policy, Construction Policy, Corporate Office, Operational excellence, Service delivery, People & Culture, Commercial Skills, Marketing Office, Vehicle & Energy, Professional Services, Facilities Management, Spot Buying, ICT, Travel HR & Managed Services	Leased	Term: 20 years Expiry: 10th May 2035 Cost: €553,952 per annum

Office Location	Number of Staff	Functions	Office leased or owned	Lease details
Floor 2, Government Offices, Cranmore Road, F91 V83R, Sligo.	24	Professional services, facilities management and Spot buying	State owned	-
Jonathan Swift Street, Trim, C15 NX36, Co. Meath.	21	Marketing office, vehicles & energy and spot buying	State owned	-
7 Eastgate Avenue, Eastgate, Little Island, T45 RX01, Co. Cork.	12	Facilities management	Leased	Term: 10 years Expiry: 21st February 2026 Cost: €49,451 per annum
4th Floor, River House, Charlotte's Quay, V94 AY9C, Limerick.	10	Travel, HR & managed services	Leased	Term: 10 years Expiry: 10th June 2022 Cost: €22,750 per annum

Office of Public Works

175. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the OPW will indicate the source of the delay in the allocation of the currently vacant and recently refurbished Deer Keepers Lodge within the Phoenix Park to a person (details supplied); when this process will be concluded; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39034/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The Deerkeeper's lodge in the Phoenix Park has undergone an extensive renovation and is now ready for occupation. The lease negotiated for this accommodation has been prepared by the Chief State Solicitor's Office and the Deerkeeper/occupant will be asked to sign this lease in the coming weeks.

Sports Facilities

176. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if funding will be approved for a project (details supplied) in County Mayo. [38748/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): Under my Department's Community and Language Supports Programme (Clár Tacaíochtaí Pobail agus Teanga) financial assistance is provided for the development and refurbishment of community, language and recreational facilities in Gaeltacht regions and for the purchase of equipment.

An application was received by Comhar Dún Chaocháin Teo, in partnership with Mayo County Council and the Ceathrú Thaidhg/Ros Dumhach Playground Committee for the development of a MUGA play area at Ceathrú Thaidhg, Béal an Mhuirthead.

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Funding of €5,535 - equivalent to 75% of the overall cost - was approved for professional fees in October 2020. A further application has been submitted to my Department from Comhar Dún Chaochán Teo for the development phase of the project. Further information was sought from Mayo County Council in relation to planning permission and at a meeting of the Westport-Belmullet Municipal District held on 28th June 2021 the Elected Members decided to approve the report in accordance with Part 8 of the Local Government (Planning and Development) Regulations 2001 – 2013 as amended, in respect of the construction of a Multi-Sport Astro Pitch in order to proceed with the development.

The application is currently receiving final consideration as part of the evaluation process and I expect to receive a full report and recommendation very shortly.

I might also mention that I had the pleasure of meeting with representatives of the Ceathrú Thaidhg/Ros Dumhach Playground Committee on my recent visit to Mayo on the 12th of July 2021 and to hear first-hand about the project.

Sports Events

177. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she has made contact with the organisers of Dublin City Marathon to establish whether any reassurance could be provided to allow this important event to be held given the likely progress in vaccines by then. [38812/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): Neither my Department nor Sport Ireland, which is the statutory body for the development of sport in Ireland, have any role in relation to the running or organisation of this event. In relation to events involving more than 5,000 persons, there is a licensing function to be discharged by the relevant local authority, under the Planning and Development (Licensing of Outdoor Events) Regulations, 2001.

Prior to the recent decision by the organisers to cancel the event for this year, which had been earmarked for the 24th of October, the organisers had sought feedback from the Expert Group on the Return to Sport (EGRTS) on a protocol they had prepared for the event. The EGRTS noted that they were not in a position to ‘approve’ the proposal received but could provide observations as requested. The Expert Group’s view on the protocol submitted was to the effect that there may be concerns about international travel associated with the event, but that the roll-out of the vaccination programme should be considered against the proposal. The Expert Group also noted that it was reasonable to anticipate the vaccination programme would have a positive implication for the delivery of the event. However any event, and the full details thereof, would have to be in line with the public health advice at the time of staging.

The matter now rests with the event organisers.

Departmental Data

178. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the number of staff by location and function in each office of her Department nationally by location; if the property is State owned or leased; and the detail of these leases in the case of those properties on a lease in terms of cost, term and next break date. [38857/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine

Martin): The number of staff by location and function in each office of my Department is given in the table below.

While matters relating to the acquisition and leasing of property for my Department are generally the responsibility of the Office of Public Works, the Department leases office premises for the use of Oifig an Comisinéir Teanga from Údarás na Galeatachta at an annual rent of €39,000 (excluding VAT). This lease, which commenced in 2014, is due to expire in 2024.

	Corpo- rate	Tourism	Culture & Arts	Gaeltacht	Sport	Media
Kildare Street, Dublin 2	79		11	1		
Joyce House, Lombard Street, Dublin		2	31	3	7	13
National Archives, Bishop Street, Dublin 2			53			
Na Forbacha, Contae na Gaillimhe	2			32		
Oifig an Comisinéir Teanga, An Spidéal, Contae na Gaillimhe				9		
Derrybeg, Co. Donegal				4		
New Road, Killarney	37	13	24		29	

Online Safety

179. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her plans to tackle pseudonymity on online platforms (details supplied). [38874/21]

181. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if the remit of the online safety commission will be extended to include an escalation point for content that constitutes online bullying. [38876/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 179 and 181 together.

The Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill will, among other things, establish an Online Safety Commissioner as part of a wider Media Commission. The role of the Commissioner will be to oversee a systems and risk-based regulatory framework for online safety that will focus on measures that regulated online services can take to progressively minimise the availability of harmful online content on their services. This will apply to both the delivery (e.g. recommendation engines) and moderation of content.

The defined categories of harmful online content are set out in the General Scheme of the Bill and include criminal material, serious cyberbullying material and material promoting self-harm, suicide and eating disorders. Provision is also made for the addition of further categories following a rigorous assessment, recommendation by the Media Commission and Oireachtas approval.

The regulatory framework will be operationalised through binding Online Safety Codes

made by the Online Safety Commissioner that will set out expectations and rules for how regulated online services, including social media services, deal with user-generated content on their platforms that falls within one of the above categories.

The powers of the Online Safety Commissioner will include a range of standard setting and information gathering powers, including the following powers; to set standards for how regulated online services handle complaints; to audit those complaints handling mechanisms; to set up a scheme to receive information from nominated bodies about systemic issues, and to issue guidance materials and advisory notices.

The Commissioner will also have a range of compliance and enforcement powers; to appoint authorised officers to investigate cases of suspected non-compliance; to seek the imposition of a financial sanction of up to €20 million or 10% of the turnover of an online platform found to be non-compliant; to require the removal or limitation of availability of individual items of content in discrete instances, and to seek an injunction to block access to a non-compliant online service in Ireland.

The Bill takes a systemic approach to regulation. The Online Safety Commissioner will not operate a mechanism which rules on complaints about individual pieces of content. There are serious concerns about the ability of any such statutory mechanism to operate effectively. For example, many of the larger online services will be regulated under this Bill on an EU wide basis, i.e. for 450 million people, raising numerous issues around scale, effective operation, the application to apply fair procedures, cultural and linguistic challenges in resolving complaints and the speed of response. However, members of the public may raise concerns with the Online Safety Commissioner and this will feed into their assessment of risk in relation to a particular service or type of content.

In addition, where the content may be criminal in nature, the appropriate point of contact would be An Garda Síochána. In these circumstances, it is considered that a systemic and risk based approach, with powers for the regulator to set standards, oversee and audit complaints mechanisms and take account of information from nominated bodies about systemic issues, will prove more effective.

With regard to anonymity or pseudonymity online, any consideration of restrictions on such practices has broad implications, including freedom of expression, the right to communicate and data protection, and would require an evidence-based and whole of Government approach. The implications of such measures therefore extend far beyond the scope of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill.

Detailed legal drafting of the Bill by the Office of the Attorney General is progressing well and the General Scheme of the Bill is currently undergoing pre-legislative scrutiny by a Joint Oireachtas Committee.

Departmental Regulations

180. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will consider bringing in regulations that would make digitally altered photographs illegal for advertising purposes unless the photographs were clearly labelled as edited. [38875/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I have no function in relation to the regulation of photography, digital editing of photographic material or advertising in general. Section 42 of the Consumer Protection Act, 2007

provides for a general prohibition of misleading commercial practices, including in relation to the provision of false, misleading or deceptive information. The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, under the aegis of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, is responsible for enforcing this statutory provision and other like provisions.

In relation to broadcast advertising, section 42 of the Broadcasting Act, 2009, provides the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland with the power to set standards for advertising carried by broadcasters through binding codes. The Authority is independent in the exercise of its functions.

In relation to commercial online advertising, the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill will provide a new Media Commission, which will replace the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, with the power to set standards for such advertising on video on-demand services and broadcast services through Media Codes and Rules and for certain regulated online services through Online Safety Codes. Detailed legal drafting of the Bill by the Office of the Attorney General is progressing well and the General Scheme of the Bill is currently undergoing pre-legislative scrutiny by the Joint Oireachtas Committee.

Question No. 181 answered with Question No. 179.

Sports Events

182. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if indoor summer camps can be held under the Sporting Ireland guidelines which permits individual training. [38877/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The current arrangements permitting individual training indoors are not germane or linked to the holding of sporting summer camps indoors by recognised National Governing Bodies.

The current position in relation to summer camps is outlined on *gov.ie*, which indicates that summer camps should adhere to public health measures on organised indoor and outdoor activities as appropriate, applying at the time.

Tourism Promotion

183. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the proposals to support the development of monastic trails as an additional tourism product; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38886/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Researching and developing tourism product experiences - such as, potentially, monastic trails - are operational matters for Fáilte Ireland. Accordingly, I have asked Fáilte Ireland to provide further information directly to the Deputy. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Animal Welfare

184. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heri-

tage if he will introduce a ban on hare coursing. [38988/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The control of live hare coursing, including the operation of individual coursing meetings and managing the use of hares for that activity, is carried out under the Greyhound Industry Act 1958, which is the responsibility of my colleague, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. My responsibility relates to the conservation status of the hare.

While the regulation of hare coursing is not under my statutory control, licences are required by the Irish Coursing Club under the terms of the Wildlife Acts on behalf of their affiliated clubs to facilitate the netting and tagging of hares for closed park meetings. The annual licence to capture and tag hares for the 2020/2021 coursing season was issued by my Department on 16 September last year. The licences granted by my Department in such instances include a range of conditions in relation to coursing hares which are designed to provide as much protection as possible to the conservation status of the hare.

My Department has received an application from the Irish Coursing Club for a licences to capture and tag hares for the forthcoming 2021/22 hare coursing season and a decision will be made on the application in due course.

Housing Provision

185. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the actions his Department will take to alleviate the inhumane conditions exposed by a recent publication (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38722/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department is committed to ensuring that tenants in social housing are provided with adequate housing that meets the standards most recently laid down in the Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2019.

My Department is actively engaging with the local authority sector to promote the preventative maintenance of local authority housing stock and provides significant funding for stock improvement works.

In addition to funding provided by the local authorities themselves in respect of their own housing stock (c. €350m per annum), my Department provides funding across a number of programmes to support the local authority work to maintain and improve their social housing stock. In all cases, it is the local authorities that identify priorities. The continued work of local authorities in undertaking stock condition surveys, their responsive and planned maintenance programmes, as well as important programmes such as the Energy Retrofitting and Voids Programmes seeks to support the local authorities maintenance programme.

Specifically with regard to Oliver Bond House, the upkeep, refurbishment and regeneration of this social housing complex is a matter, in the first instance, for the local authority, Dublin City Council (DCC).

However, I understand that DCC is actively engaged with the residents and is working on a number of short-term projects to improve the outdoor/common areas as well as long-term proposals for the retrofitting and refurbishment of the flats at Oliver Bond House.

DCC has advised it is working on proposals and designs for two projects that will see the total refurbishments of all 397 flats at Oliver Bond House in two phases to bring them up to

modern standards including size and energy efficiency. My Department looks forward to receiving these submissions for funding consideration from DCC and will work with them to ascertain the appropriate funding mechanisms for these projects.

In addition to the normal voids programme funding I recently announced funding to bring flats that are vacant in older flat complexes, including Oliver Bond House, back into stock in the short term.

Departmental Funding

186. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the funding made available to each local authority for housing adaption grants in 2020 and 2021 and the expected amount for 2022, in tabular form. [38723/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Details of the funding provided by my Department to each local authority in respect of the Disabled Persons Grants Scheme/Improvement Works in Lieu (DPG/IWIL) for local authority tenants in 2020 is available at the following link.

www.housing.gov.ie/housing/grantsfinancial-assistance/disabled-persons-grants-and-improvement-works-lieu-schemes

The 2021 DPG allocations issued to local authorities in May, details of which can be found at the link below. Local authorities are currently progressing their 2021 work programmes but it will be later this year before significant recoupment claims are lodged with my Department. Full details in relation to the drawdown of funding in 2021 will be available early in 2022.

www.gov.ie/en/press-release/20e02-minister-obrien-minister-burke-approve-over-23m-in-funding-for-the-disabled-persons-grant-scheme-improvement-works-in-lieu-of-local-authority-housing-scheme/

Separately, funding of €75 million is available nationally in 2021 for the Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability scheme, in respect of private houses. Local authorities fund 20% of the overall budget from their own resources with the balance of 80% funded by the exchequer. This funding has increased year on year since 2014.

Funding allocations for 2020 and 2021 are publicly available on my Department's website at the following links:

For 2020: *www.gov.ie/en/press-release/0c0cf-minister-obrien-announces-over-73-million-for-housing-adaptation-grant/*

For 2021: *www.gov.ie/en/press-release/0da3f-minister-obrien-minister-burke-announce-75m-fund-to-improve-homes-of-older-people-people-with-a-disability/*

Details of the funding drawn down for the grants up to 2020, are available on my Department's website at the following link:

www.housing.gov.ie/housing/statistics/social-and-affordble/other-local-authority-housing-scheme-statistics.

The following table contains details of the 2021 exchequer funding drawn down by local authorities for housing adaptation grants up to 30 June 2021.

15 July 2021

Local Authority	Exchequer Drawdown to 30 June 2021
Carlow	€492,388
Cavan	€202,297
Clare	€248,416
Cork City	€412,158
Cork	€1,346,244
Donegal	€489,762
Dublin City	€2,181,752
Dun Laoghaire/Rathdown	€422,046
Fingal	€667,859
Galway City	€373,797
Galway	€0
Kerry	€704,248
Kildare	€290,465
Kilkenny	€366,221
Laois	€32,000
Leitrim	€160,035
Limerick City & County	€830,858
Longford	€146,641
Louth	€485,085
Mayo	€871,384
Meath	€746,594
Monaghan	€486,450
Offaly	€47,637
Roscommon	€215,641
Sligo	€631,201
South Dublin	€782,844
Tipperary	€1,033,234
Waterford City & County	€225,442
Westmeath	€235,814
Wexford	€844,194
Wicklow	€396,141

In respect of 2022, as part of the annual budgetary process, consideration will be given to funding under these schemes in line with the Programme for Government commitments and the Policy Statement on Housing Options for Our Ageing Population, which is available on my Department's website at the following link:

www.gov.ie/en/publication/ea33c1-housing-options-for-our-ageing-population-policy-statement/

Departmental Funding

187. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will provide a list of all requests received from local authorities for additional funding for housing adaptation grants since 2016, in tabular form. [38724/21]

188. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of local authorities which did not spend their full allocation of funds for housing adaptation grants since 2016, by year in tabular form. [38725/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 187 and 188 together.

My Department provides funding under the suite of Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability, to assist people in private houses to make their accommodation more suitable for their needs. The grants include the Housing Adaptation Grant for People with a Disability, the Mobility Aids Grant and the Housing Aid for Older People, which are 80% funded by my Department, with a 20% contribution from the resources of the local authority. The detailed administration of this scheme including assessment, approval and prioritisation, is the responsibility of local authorities. Local authorities receive an overall allocation, with the responsibility for the apportionment between the three schemes being a matter for each authority given their knowledge of local need.

My Department's approach each year is to issue a single full year allocation to each local authority, so they can plan and implement the grants programme. Over the course of the year, my Department works closely with the local authorities to monitor spend and to achieve a full drawdown of the available funding. This means that if underspends arise on the part of some local authorities, they can be redistributed to other authorities which have high levels of grant activity.

The following table contains details of the number of local authorities which did not draw down their full allocation under the scheme from 2016 - 2020.

Year	Number of Local Authorities
2016	21
2017	14
2018	15
2019	17
2020	26

Separately, the following table contains details of additional exchequer funding requested and drawn down by local authorities under the scheme from 2016 - 2020, and currently requested for 2021.

https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-07-15_pq18715072021_en.docx "exchequer funding requested"

Question No. 188 answered with Question No. 187.

Housing Provision

189. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of housing complaints that were received in the first six months of 2021; the categories that the complaints fall under; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38754/21]

195. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of complaints received regarding non-compliance with the rent freeze and ban on evictions while these provisions were in place; and if he will make a statement on the

matter. [38760/21]

208. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of complaints that have been investigated by the Residential Tenancies Board over the past 12 months; the number of these complaints that were upheld; the nature of these complaints; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38793/21]

209. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of complaints regarding misuse of the evictions to facilitate renovations provisions of the residential tenancies Acts that have been investigated by the Residential Tenancies Board over the past year; the number of these complaints that were upheld; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38794/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 189, 195, 208 and 209 together.

The Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) was established as an independent statutory body under the Residential Tenancies Acts 2004-2021, to operate a national tenancy registration system and to facilitate the resolution of disputes between landlords and tenants.

My Department does not collect the data sought, however the Clerk of the Dáil requested that arrangements be put in place to facilitate the provision of information by State Bodies to members of the Oireachtas. Following the issue of Circular LG (P)05/16 on 20 September 2016 from my Department, the RTB set up a dedicated email address for this purpose. The RTB may be contacted at OireachtasMembersQueries@rtb.ie to establish the extent to which it may hold the information sought.

Rental Sector

190. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the tenancy deposit protection scheme will be commenced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38755/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): The Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2015 provided for, among other things, the establishment of a tenancy deposit protection scheme to be operated by the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB).

The Programme for Government commits to the examination of a system of holding rental deposits and how best to achieve this is under consideration my Department.

However, there have been significant changes in the rental market since the 2015 scheme was first envisaged and designed. For example, the 2015 scheme was intended to be financed by the interest payable on deposits lodged; this is no longer viable, given the current financial market conditions.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that disputes relating to deposits are no longer the most common dispute type referred to the RTB.

Financing the operation of the scheme is an important consideration, particularly in terms of ensuring that the likely outcomes of a new scheme are achieved efficiently and effectively and that the best value from public funds is secured. Careful consideration is therefore required to introduce any necessary reforms and enhancements to the 2015 scheme, with a view to consid-

ering whether and how to introduce a re-designed scheme that is fit for purpose and suitable for current and future rental and financial markets.

Any review of the scope and provisions of a Deposit Protection scheme will need to take account of changes in the residential sectors since the 2015 Deposit Protection Scheme legal provisions were enacted, to inform any necessary legislative change. Consideration will need to be given as to whether or not it is feasible to proceed to revise and implement a deposit protection scheme at this time, or to defer to a later point in time, when the RTB's Change Management Plan has been fully implemented and more robust data and information is available for consideration.

The RTB has cut case times for deposit-related disputes as the introduction of new processes has borne fruit and the question of proportionality is key and it is imperative to question whether the scale of spending and intervention required is commensurate with the scale of the issue. From a value-for-money perspective at a time when the rental market is experiencing extreme pressure in terms of supply and costs, the introduction of a deposit protection scheme would require careful consideration.

Section 7 of the Residential Tenancies (No. 2) Act 2021 inserts a new section 19B into the Residential Tenancies Act 2004 which will apply to tenancies created no earlier than one month after the passing of the Act (i.e. from 9 August 2021), to restrict the total amount that a tenant is required to pay to a landlord by way of a deposit or an advance rent payment to secure a tenancy to no more than the equivalent of 2 months' rent (i.e. any deposit cannot exceed 1 month's rent and any advance rent payment cannot exceed 1 month's rent). A restriction of the equivalent of 1 month's rent is also placed on the amount that a tenant is obliged to pay as a regular advance rent payment to a landlord during a tenancy. Provision is made for a student residing in student specific accommodation to choose to pay a greater amount of advance rent, if he/she so wishes.

These measures are intended to greatly reduce any financial exposure to tenants, including students who do not opt out of the new protections, on foot of paying such restricted upfront payments.

Departmental Reports

191. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of Departmental reports that are pending publication; the titles of these reports; the dates he anticipates the publication of each; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38756/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): A number of Departmental reports are pending publication, i.e. expected to be published in Quarter 3 2021, the details of which are set out in the following table:

Title of Departmental Report	Completion Due
Housing for All – A New Housing Plan for Ireland	July 2021
Impacts of 2018 Fires on the Biodiversity of Killarney National Park	July 2021
Report on the outcomes of the consultation on Significant Water Management Issues in Ireland	August 2021

Title of Departmental Report	Completion Due
Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage Annual Report 2020	September 2021
Construction Status Report Quarter 2 2021	September 2021

In addition to the above, my Department and the HSE are co-authors of a Report on the National Traveller COVID-19 Accommodation Preparedness Checklist. That report is due to be published in August.

Legislative Process

192. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of Bills being worked on by his Department that are pending publication; the title of these Bills; the date he anticipates the publication of each; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38757/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): My Department is working on a number of Bills that are pending publication, i.e. expected to be published in Quarter 3 2021, the details of which are set out in the following table:

Title of Bill	Anticipated Publication Date
Maritime Area Planning Bill	July 2021
Building Control (Construction Industry Register Ireland) Bill 2021	September 2021
Electoral Reform Bill	September 2021
Water Environment (Abstractions and Certain Impoundments) Bill	September 2021

Information on Bills before the Oireachtas but not yet enacted is available at: www.oireachtas.ie/en/bills/find-bills-and-acts/?billType=bills&keyword=Housing&year=2019-2021&sortBy=billNumber

In addition to these, work is ongoing on other Bills such as the Tailte Éireann Bill, the Water Services Separation Bill, the Local Government (Directly Elected Mayor with Executive Functions in Limerick City and County) Bill, the Planning and Development (Amendment) (LSRD) Bill and the Housing and Residential Tenancies Bill.

Legislative Process

193. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of legislative provisions that have been passed by the Houses of the Oireachtas but yet to be commenced by him; the list and details of these provisions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38758/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): Details of the Acts, including sections of Acts, falling under the remit of my Department, which have yet to be commenced are set out in the attached table.

data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-07-15_pq193-15-7-21_en.docx

Housing Provision

194. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of social, affordable, and cost rental homes built by the State in quarter 1 and 2 2021, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38759/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): My Department publishes comprehensive programme level statistics on a quarterly basis on social housing delivery activity. This data includes a breakdown of social housing delivery across a range of mechanisms. Data for Quarter 1 2021 is published on the statistics page of my Department’s website, at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/collection/6060e-overall-social-housing-provision/. Data for Quarter 2 2021 is currently being compiled and will be published in due course.

In addition to the statistical overview of activity in each local authority, a detailed Social Housing Construction Status Report (CSR) is published each quarter. The CSR provides details of individual build projects in each local authority. The most recent publication covers the period up to the end of Q1 2021 and is available at the following link: rebuildingireland.ie/news/minister-obrien-publishes-social-housing-construction-status-report-for-q1-2021/

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, which has just been approved by the Oireachtas. It 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. The Bill also expands Part V planning requirements to increase the 10% contribution requirement to 20% and to apply it to cost rental as well as social and affordable housing.

The first Cost Rental homes will be provided by Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs), facilitated by the new Cost Rental Equity Loan (CREL) scheme, under which funding for 390 homes was approved earlier this year. The first 25 of these will become available at Taylor Hill in Balbriggan in August, with further homes to follow later this year, in addition to the 50 homes at the pilot Cost Rental development at Enniskerry Road. These homes represent the first steps of this important new sector.

In addition to the aforementioned Cost Rental homes at Enniskerry Road which have benefitted from Serviced Sites Fund (SSF) subvention, the first affordable purchase homes supported by SSF funding will be delivered in Quarter 4 of 2021 at Boherboy Road, Cork City.

Question No. 195 answered with Question No. 189.

Vacant Properties

196. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of vacant and derelict housing units across the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38761/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): My Department does not hold data on the amount of vacant and derelict housing units in the State. Each of the 31 local authorities have prepared a Vacant Homes

Action Plan for their administrative area. The Vacant Home Action Plan identifies the scale of vacant homes in their jurisdiction and sets ambitious but realistic targets for the number of vacant homes that can ultimately be brought back into use. The Vacant Homes Office in each local authority is the central point of contact for owners of vacant properties at a local level.

To further assist in recording levels of vacancy, the *vacanthomes.ie* website has been developed by Mayo County Council on behalf of the local government sector. This provides a central portal for individuals to anonymously log possible vacant properties and alert local authorities who can then follow up with the owners to see whether the house can be re-used quickly. The total of properties logged on the website nationally currently stands at 5,875.

Data in relation to the number of vacant local authority units is not collated by my Department, however, statistics in relation to the social housing stock are published by the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) in their Annual Reports on Performance Indicators in Local Authorities. These reports provide a range of information in relation to social housing stock, including the level of vacancy broken down by local authority. The most recent report, relating to 2019, is available on the NOAC website at the following link: [noac.ie/noac_publications/noac-performance-indicators-report-2019/](https://www.noac.ie/noac_publications/noac-performance-indicators-report-2019/)

Housing Schemes

197. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the percentage of persons eligible for Housing First who have received a Housing First home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38762/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): Housing First enables homeless individuals with high levels of complex needs to obtain permanent secure accommodation with the provision of intensive housing and health supports to help them maintain their tenancies.

The National Implementation Plan for Housing First, published in September 2018, which puts the programme on a national footing, is designed to provide this response, by delivering permanent housing solutions and associated supports for rough sleepers and long-term users of emergency accommodation. It extends the delivery of Housing First nationally, with the introduction of targets for each local authority.

The Plan includes an overall target of 663 tenancies in the period 2018-2021. The implementation of the Plan is a joint initiative of my Department, the Department of Health, the HSE and the local authorities. The regional targets contained in the Plan were agreed by local authorities based on a review of homelessness data and a national survey of the support needs of homeless individuals conducted with service providers. In this regard, it is important to note that the majority of individuals in emergency accommodation do not require the level of supports provided by Housing First.

In line with the National Implementation Plan, Housing First is being delivered on a regional basis by the local authorities and the HSE. Contracts for the delivery of services have been put in place in each of the nine regions responsible for the delivery of homeless services with tenancies now in place in every region. At the end of March 2021, a total of 539 individuals were being housed under the Housing First programme including 438 individuals who have been housed since the publication of the National Implementation Plan.

The Programme for Government commits to the further expansion of Housing First. Research is currently being undertaken by the Housing Agency to carry out an assessment of need

for the supports provided by Housing First. This will inform the expansion of the Programme which I expect to announce later this year, in advance of the expiration of the current National Implementation Plan.

Housing Policy

198. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the policy and practical steps that have been taken to support the scale-up of affordable co-operative housing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38763/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): To date, Serviced Sites Funding of almost €200 million has been approved in principle in support of 40 infrastructure projects in 14 local authority areas across 9 counties, which will assist in the delivery of almost 4,200 affordable homes for purchase or for rent, all of which will be delivered on local authority land.

Affordable Cost Rental homes will also be delivered by Approved Housing Bodies and the Land Development Agency.

The Affordable Housing Bill 2021 which has now cleared all stages in the Oireachtas is the first ever standalone affordable housing legislation. The provisions of the Bill establish the basis for 4 new affordable housing measures. These measures will deliver on the Programme for Government commitment to put affordability at the heart of the housing system and prioritise the increased supply of affordable homes through (1) delivering affordable homes on local authority lands, (2) the introduction of a new form of tenure in Cost Rental, (3) a new affordable purchase shared equity scheme and (4) expanding Part V planning requirements to increase the 10% contribution requirement to 20% and to apply it to cost rental as well as social and affordable housing.

The provisions under Part 2, Section 6 outlines those bodies which a housing authority may enter arrangements with to may make dwellings available for the purpose of sale to eligible applicants under affordable dwelling purchase arrangements

To this end, during the Bill’s passage through the Oireachtas, I accepted an amendment to the provisions which now forms part of the Bill under Section 6 (2) (b). This allows for a housing authority to enter into arrangements with a community-led housing organisation, a housing co-operative or a community land trust, to acquire, build or cause to be built, dwellings for the purpose of sale to eligible applicants.

Government will very shortly publish a new 5 year ‘Housing for All’ strategy which will include ambitious affordable home delivery targets and further details for these schemes.

Legislative Measures

199. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will introduce legislation to prevent persons from being evicted into homelessness; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38764/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): The Residential Tenancies Acts 2004-2021 provide that where a tenant has been in occupation of a dwelling for a continuous period of 6 months, with no valid notice of termination having been served during that time, a ‘Part 4 tenancy’ is established to cover the next 5 years and 6

months.

Section 34 of the Acts provides that a landlord must state a reason for the termination in any tenancy termination notice served, and the termination will not be valid unless that reason relates to one of the following:

- the tenant has failed to comply with the obligations (other than the obligation to pay rent) of the tenancy;
- the tenant has failed to comply with the obligation to pay rent under the tenancy;
- the landlord intends to sell the dwelling within the next 9 months;
- the dwelling is no longer suited to the needs of the occupying household;
- the landlord requires the dwelling for own or family member occupation;
- vacant possession is required for substantial refurbishment of the dwelling; and/or
- the landlord intends to change the use of the dwelling.

The Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2019 strengthened the security of tenure for tenants by significantly extending the duration of tenancy termination notice periods; for example, a minimum of 180 days (approx. 6 months) notice must be provided by landlords who terminate a tenancy of between 3 and 7 years' duration.

Since 1 July 2019, the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) is empowered under Part 7A – Complaints, Investigations and Sanctions – of the Residential Tenancies Acts to investigate improper conduct by landlords and to impose sanctions, where appropriate. In particular, an unlawful tenancy termination may be investigated with the landlord liable to a sanction of up to €30,000.

Section 56 of the Acts provides for the award of damages for abuse of the termination procedure, and the RTB can make a direction that a landlord pay an amount by way of damages for the deprivation of the tenancy.

The drafting of the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2019 benefited from input from the sector, including the key Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) working in housing and homelessness. In particular, the 2019 amendments to legally tighten the tenancy termination provisions and to significantly extend the tenancy termination notice periods were informed by the experiences in the rental sector, as highlighted by the NGOs.

The Planning and Development, and Residential Tenancies, Act 2020 (PDRTA) provides that during the period from 11 January 2021 until 12 January 2022, for tenants with rent arrears due to Covid-19 and at risk of losing their tenancy who make the necessary declaration, landlords must provide in any notice of termination on the ground of rent arrears an effective termination date which is 90 days from the serving of the notice or 13 January 2022, whichever is the later.

The Residential Tenancies (No. 2) Act 2021, which was signed into law on 9 July 2021, provides for the extended the application of the enhanced protections under the PDRTA for 6 months from 13 July 2021 to 12 January 2022.

Comprehensive information in relation to the enhanced protections under the PDRTA and the State supports available to assist tenants is available on www.rtb.ie.

The Programme for Government - 'Our Shared Future', commits to improve the security of tenure for tenants, through legislating for tenancies of indefinite duration, increasing RTB enforcement and examining incentives for long-term leasing.

Subject to legal advices, I expect the General Scheme of the Housing and Residential Tenancies Bill to be submitted to Government in the Autumn for approval to proceed to legal drafting. A provision relating to tenancies of indefinite duration is being considered in this context.

Housing Policy

200. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the way the housing for all plan officially relates to the Rebuilding Ireland plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38765/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Rebuilding Ireland: An Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness was launched by the then Government in July 2016, and set out an action plan for housing and homelessness, with targets and objectives up to 2020 and 2021. The Plan has been implemented since then, with many new policy initiatives and area specific strategies being put in place over the last number of years.

The Government will shortly publish a new housing policy and action plan 'Housing for All'. It is currently being drafted with a whole of Government approach, will build on what was achieved in recent years and reflect the housing commitments in the Programme for Government - Our shared Future.

'Housing for All' will set out a pathway to the sustainable supply we need, at a price that people can afford, with appropriate housing options for the most vulnerable in our society.

Rental Sector

201. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the estimated amount spent in each of the years 2015 to 2020 and to date in 2021 on the inspection and enforcement of private rental standards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38766/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Strategy for the Rental Sector sets out a series of measures to be introduced to ensure the quality of private rental accommodation by strengthening the applicable standards and improving the inspection and enforcement systems.

The Strategy recognises the need for additional resources to be provided to local authorities to aid increased inspections of properties and ensure greater compliance with the Regulations. Increased funding was made available each year since 2018 to enable local authorities build inspection capacity incrementally, with payments based on the number of inspections undertaken. Significant progress was made across the sector. The number of inspections more than doubled from 19,645 in 2017 to 40,728 in 2019.

€6 million of Exchequer funding was made available to local authorities in 2020 and €10 million in 2021. However, pandemic restrictions have severely impacted on inspection activity since March 2020. In response to the pandemic some local authorities have been piloting virtual inspections and my Department is encouraging and supporting this initiative by providing Exchequer funding to those that are participating.

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The table below sets out the amount spent in each of the years 2015 to 2020 and to date in 2021 in respect of the inspection and enforcement of private rental standards:

2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021 to date
€1,882,672	€1,702,300	€2,002,150	€3,037,634	€5,661,265	€3,625,365	€971,195

Inspection data in respect of Q2 2021 has been requested from local authorities and payments in respect of this period will issue in due course.

Future funding will be considered as part of the normal estimates budgeting process with the aim of maintaining my Department's subvention to local authorities at levels which assist them in meeting their inspection targets.

Land Issues

202. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the way the publicly available information on land prices and land transaction in Ireland compares to that in other EU countries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38767/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The Property Registration Authority (PRA) registers land/property transactions which, on registration, can be accessed by the public as part of the National Land Register. Information on the Register and the registration process is available on the PRA's website at www.prai.ie.

The consideration (price paid) is not shown on the Register. However, this may be available on the Property Price Register maintained by the Property Services Regulatory Authority.

I am not aware of any comparative study across EU jurisdictions on publicly available information in respect of land transactions and land prices.

Housing Provision

203. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the protections that will be put in place to ensure that the purchase of open market homes by housing authorities does not increase house prices in a local market; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38768/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): As set out in the Programme for Government, a key focus for the delivery of social housing is for the majority of the 50,000 new units to be delivered over the next five-years, to be built by local authorities, Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) and State agencies. This is part of our focus to prioritise the increased supply of public, social, and affordable homes.

While this will be the majority approach to delivery, I still see some level of acquisitions of existing properties to be a valuable part of the delivery of social housing, recognising that in some areas of the country, good value for money can be obtained. In those situations, it can make sense for local authorities to undertake acquisitions in a targeted and strategic manner.

I have directed local authorities and AHBs where they undertake such targeted acquisitions, that they do not compete with private purchasers and leave value in the market particularly for first-time buyers. However, within these constraints, acquisitions by local authorities can be cheaper than construction and allows them to make best use of existing housing stock. I have also asked local authorities to increasingly target vacant and derelict properties that can be brought back to use as part of new public housing delivery.

Where local authorities and AHBs engage with developers to acquire newly developed housing through turnkey arrangements, this is done on the basis that there is not undue interference in private housing supply and in most cases, the developments are ones that would not have been undertaken without the interest of a local authority or an AHB.

I am determined that the Government's new "Housing for All" strategy will put in place the resources to deliver new public housing based in the main on delivery by local authorities, AHBs and State agencies with property acquisitions from the open market being a targeted and strategic aspect only of delivery.

Housing Provision

204. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the percentage of new affordable homes that will be built directly by housing authorities; the percentage that will be bought from the open market; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38769/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): To date, Serviced Sites Funding of almost €200 million has been approved in principle in support of 40 infrastructure projects in 14 local authority areas across 9 counties, which will assist in the delivery of almost 4,200 affordable homes for purchase or for rent, all of which will be delivered on local authority land.

Details of 35 SSF projects which received approval in principle under the two SSF calls to date are available on the Department's website as follows.

Call 1 www.gov.ie/en/press-release/dbc55-minister-murphy-gives-the-go-ahead-for-ten-local-authority-sites-for-affordable-housing-under-the-serviced-sites-fund/ .

Call 2 www.gov.ie/en/press-release/eaf39-minister-murphy-approves-84m-in-funding-for-25-local-authority-sites-to-support-the-delivery-of-approximately-1770-affordable-homes-nationally-under-the-serviced-sites-fund-ssf/

In addition to these projects, approval in principle has also been given to five further applications for SSF funding, namely, Dublin City Council's projects in Emmet Road and Oscar Traynor Road, Fingal County Council's projects in Ballymastone, Donabate, and Hayestown, Rush and Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council's project in Shanganagh.

The Affordable Housing Bill 2021, which has now cleared all stages in the Oireachtas, is the first ever standalone affordable housing legislation. The provisions of the Bill establish the basis for 4 new affordable housing measures. These measures will deliver on the Programme for Government commitment to put affordability at the heart of the housing system and prioritise the increased supply of affordable homes through (1) delivering affordable homes by local authorities, (2) the introduction of a new form of tenure in Cost Rental, (3) a new affordable purchase shared equity scheme and (4) expanding Part V planning requirements to increase the 10% contribution requirement to 20% and to apply it to cost rental as well as social and afford-

able housing.

Government will very shortly publish a new 5 year ‘Housing for All’ strategy which will include ambitious affordable home delivery targets for these schemes.

Housing Policy

205. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the incentives his Department has in place or plans to put in place to support house owners who wish to relocate from properties that are too big for their needs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38772/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): Firstly, it is important to note that it is settled Government policy to support older people to live in their own homes and communities with dignity and independence for as long as possible, as this has the best outcomes both for the individual and for society as a whole. I recognise, however, that there are some people who, for various reasons, may wish to move from larger houses to smaller houses, or to apartments, and it is important that they have the option to do so.

Secondly, my Department, in conjunction with the Department of Health, is developing policy options in support of a range of housing and accommodation alternatives for older people including supported housing/housing with care in accordance with the principles of the joint policy statement, “Housing Options for Our Ageing Population”. This policy statement was published by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and the Department of Health in 2019. The policy statement is available on my Department’s website at:

www.housing.gov.ie/housing/special-housing-needs/older-people/housing-options-our-ageing-population-policy-statement .

A number of the 40 Actions in the Joint Statement consider the issue of rightsizing within the context of providing a variety of housing options for older people depending on their circumstances. Some local authorities already provide for such “rightsizing” for their tenants who express a wish to be allocated older person’s specific housing or a smaller dwelling such as an apartment instead of a house.

My Department and the Implementation Group for the Joint Statement are examining various “rightsizing” support options and a number of research projects are informing this work. It is intended that the Implementation Group will provide its final report addressing each of the 40 actions, including those relating to rightsizing, by the end of 2021.

Finally, the issues of ageing in place and rightsizing are being considered in the context of preparations for the Government’s new Housing Strategy - Housing for All.

Voluntary Housing Sector

206. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if efforts will be made by his Department to improve regulation of voluntary housing bodies, including the introduction of robust formal inspection of private apartment complexes and the provision of technical assistance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38782/21]

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

Significant progress has been made by my Department in putting in place the framework for statutory regulation of Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs). Specifically, on 1 February this year I established the Approved Housing Bodies Regulatory Authority (AHBRA) - an independent Regulator to oversee the effective governance, financial management and performance of all AHBs.

The functions of the Regulator (as set out in the Housing (Regulation of Approved Housing Bodies) Act 2019)) shall be to:

- establish and maintain a register of AHBs,
- register persons as AHBs,
- prepare draft standards for approval by the Minister under section 37 and publish the approved standards,
- monitor and assess compliance by AHBs with this Act, in particular the approved standards,
- carry out investigations under Part 5,
- under Part 6, protect tenants and AHBs and cancel the registration of AHBs,
- encourage and facilitate the better governance, administration and management, including corporate governance and financial management, of AHBs by the provision of such information and advice, in such form and manner, as the Regulator considers appropriate,
- with a view to promoting awareness and understanding of this Act, make available such information as appears to the Regulator to be expedient to give to the public about the operation of this Act, in such form and manner, as the Regulator considers appropriate,
- collect such information concerning AHBs as the Regulator considers necessary and appropriate for the purposes of the performance of the Regulator's functions, and
- publish such information (including statistical information) concerning AHBs as the Regulator considers appropriate.

It is anticipated that the AHBRA will be operational in early 2022. This is to allow the Regulator sufficient time to determine its strategy and adopt the standards by which AHBs will be assessed. The drafting of standards, which AHBs must comply with, is a key function of the Regulator and will involve consultation with the sector and key stakeholders.

The draft standards will relate to

- The governance of AHBs;
- The financial management of, and financial reporting by AHBs;
- Property and asset management by AHBs; and
- Tenancy management of AHBs.

All AHBs, once registered or deemed to be registered with the Regulator, must comply with the standards. More information in relation to the specific work of AHBRA can be found at www.ahbregulator.ie

In addition, an AHB is required to have tenancy agreements in place and to register all of its

tenancies with the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB). The Residential Tenancies Act 2004 (as amended) regulates the landlord-tenant relationship in the private rental sector and sets out the rights and obligations of landlords and tenants.

Minimum standards for rental accommodation are prescribed in the Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2019, made under section 18 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1992. These Regulations focus on tenant safety and specify requirements in relation to a range of matters, such as structural repair, sanitary facilities, heating, ventilation, natural light, safety of gas, oil and electrical supply and fire. These Regulations apply to all properties let or available for let and are available at www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2019/si/137/made/en/print

All landlords, including AHBs, have a legal obligation to ensure that their rented properties comply with these regulations. Responsibility for enforcement of the regulations rests with the relevant local authority and AHB properties are included in the rented dwellings covered by local authority private rental inspection regimes.

The Strategy for the Rental Sector sets out a series of measures to be introduced to ensure the quality of private rental accommodation by strengthening the applicable standards and improving the inspection and enforcement systems. The Strategy recognises the need for additional resources to be provided to local authorities to aid increased inspections of properties and ensure greater compliance with the Regulations.

Increased funding was made available by my Department each year since 2018 to enable local authorities build inspection capacity incrementally, with payments based on the number of inspections undertaken. Significant progress was made across the sector with the number of inspections more than doubling from 19,645 in 2017 to 40,728 in 2019. €6 million was made available to local authorities in 2020 and €10 million in 2021. However, restrictions arising from the Covid-19 pandemic have greatly impacted on inspection activity since March 2020. In response, some local authorities have been piloting virtual inspections and my Department is encouraging and supporting this initiative by providing funding. In line with updated public health guidance, the resumption of in person inspections is permitted from 14 July, subject to the necessary health and safety measures.

Departmental Schemes

207. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the cost of correcting fire defects will be addressed by the new working group on structural defects; if steps are being taken to ensure that those who move early to correct defects will not be disadvantaged in access to supports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38783/21]

212. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when he will implement the comprehensive set of recommendations contained in the report of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Planning and Local Government, Safe as Houses? A Report on Building Standards, Building Controls & Consumer Protection; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38826/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 207 and 212 together.

The Programme for Government sets out a number of commitments in respect of the important policy area of building defects and provides for an examination of defects in housing,

having regard to the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing report, “Safe as Houses”.

In this context, I established a working group to examine defects in housing. The plenary working group has been meeting monthly since March 2021, in addition to subgroup meetings. The group’s terms of reference were adopted in May 2021 and include:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Technical options for the remediation of dwellings,
- Efficient means of carrying out work,
- individual dwellings or whole building approach,
- routine maintenance/refurbishment or remediation,

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- Structures or delivery channels needed to facilitate resolution – advice and support.
- Evaluate the potential cost of technical remediation options.
- Pursue options on possible financial solutions to effect a resolution, in line with the Programme for Government commitment to identify options for those impacted by defects to access low-cost, long-term finance.
- To report to the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the Examination of Defects in Housing.

In regard to the working group's deliberations, the group will seek to engage with a range of interested parties, including homeowners, public representatives, local authorities, product manufacturers, building professionals and industry stakeholders, among others to examine the issue of defects in housing and report to me on the matter. Arrangements in regard to the consultation with relevant parties are currently being put in place by the working group.

I am satisfied that the group is working effectively and efficiently on this complex matter and I look forward to a report in due course following completion of their deliberation. Once I receive the report I will give full consideration to its contents, any further speculation or discussion on the output of the working group is premature at this stage.

Finally, it should be noted that the ongoing building control reform agenda, with its many initiatives, provides a comprehensive roadmap for embedding a culture of real compliance with Building Regulations within the construction industry. The reform agenda includes:

- Amendments made to the Building Control Regulations;
- Establishment of the National Building Control Office; and
- The ongoing development of new legislation through the Building Control (Construction Industry Register Ireland) Bill.

Question No. 208 answered with Question No. 189.

Question No. 209 answered with Question No. 189.

National Parks and Wildlife Service

210. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a matter relating to the public liability limit requirements by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38799/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): As the Deputy will be aware, the purpose of public liability insurance is to ensure that the potential costs of any awards against the policyholder and any legal costs associated with such a claim are met. I am satisfied therefore that the requirements presently set for commercial operators on State lands is appropriate and proportionate.

National Parks and Wildlife Service

211. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heri-

tage the reason the National Parks and Wildlife Service withdrew permission for works on a project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38814/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) of my Department issued Ministerial Consent with conditions for a fully ecologically assessed proposal to restore the Eire 6 WWII at East Mountain, Howth Head, Co. Dublin.

The conditions attached to the Ministerial Consent required the full implementation of the methodology and mitigations included in the Natura Impact Assessment submitted in support of the application.

NPWS site investigations have shown that the conditions of the Ministerial Consent have not been adhered to, and no application to vary the conditions was received by NPWS. If permitted to

continue the works could cause the deterioration of natural habitats within the Howth Head Natura 2000 site. The consent was set aside pending engagement with NPWS and I would ask the Howth EIRE 6 Restoration Group to get in touch with the District Conservation Officer in that regard.

Question No. 212 answered with Question No. 207.

Departmental Data

213. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the average all-in development cost to the Exchequer for one-, two-, three- and four-bedroom social houses and one-, two- and three-bedroom social apartments delivered through the social housing investment programme in the past 12 months. [38827/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department assesses, approves and records local authority social housing delivery on a project basis, rather than on the basis of individual unit types.

As Social Housing Investment Programme (SHIP) funded construction projects by local authorities must, like all publicly-funded construction programmes, comply with the Public Spending Code and Capital Works Management Framework, my Department periodically issues Unit Cost Ceilings (UCCs) for each local authority area, for use as a key benchmark for the development and costing of scheme designs at capital appraisal stage. While not a record of actual delivery costs, UCCs are based on an analysis of returned data from tendered social housing schemes over an extended period and updated based on published tender index information as required.

To monitor tender cost trends and to inform the UCCs levels, my Department analyses the tender data for the construction cost element of new build schemes approved under the SHIP and Capital Assistance Scheme four stage approval processes for each unit type, where sufficient information is available to allow such costs to be extrapolated and where the information available is appropriate for comparison purposes.

Outlined in the tables below are average construction costs (incl. VAT) per unit type, recorded as part of the aforementioned analysis for projects tendered in each of the years 2019 to 2020. The tables also set out the range of costs that make up this average for each unit type. The range of costs recorded vary, depending on design, location and on the level of abnormal

requirements for each scheme, for instance existing site conditions, demolitions, service diversions and site access requirements. Abnormal costs are also separately identified in the tables below.

	Construction Costs* (incl abnormals)	Construction Costs* (incl abnormals)	AbnormalCosts	AbnormalCosts
	Average CostPer Unit	Range ofCosts Per Unit	Average CostPer Unit	Range of Costs Per Unit
	2020	2020	2020	2020
1 bed house	€185,246	€139k - €237k	€25,181	€3k - €46k
2 bed house	€195,392	€129k - €263k	€25,115	€6k - €66k
3 bed house	€214,076	€152k - €342k	€25,121	€6k - €66k
4 bed house	€263,204	€205k - €321k	€41,527	€19k - €66k
1 bed apartment	€197,087	€169k - €269k	€32,919	€24k - €54k
2 bed apartment	€230,300	€198k - €306k	€16,882	€7k - €54k
3 bed apartment	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
	2019	2019	2019	2019
1 bed house	€189,320	€144k - €208k	€26,699	€7k - €47k
2 bed house	€198,174	€136k - €255k	€20,022	€4k - €58k
3 bed house	€226,455	€131k - €346k	€19,227	€4k - €58k
4 bed house	€234,794	€192k - €298k	€19,510	€4k - €58k
1 bed apartment	€291,762	€129k - €354k	€32,609	€4k - €43k
2 bed apartment	€290,902	€170k - €373k	€26,249	€4k - €43k
3 bed apartment	€323,407	€232k - €398k	€27,379	€4k - €43k
* Construction Costs as shown, are derived from unit cost analysis and capture the construction cost element only incl abnormals (i.e. not all-in costs)				

The above costs relate to the construction element of the all-in delivery cost. Other items that make up the all-in total include:

- Design/technical fees: Design fees vary from project to project, depending on the location, size and complexity of a scheme (and depending on whether design services are provided by a local authority in-house or via external appointment). As a guideline/indicator, design fee are generally expected to range between 7.5% to 12.5% of construction costs.

- Land cost: Land costs will vary significantly from project to project, depending on location and ownership status (i.e. land costs could vary from existing local authority land at no cost to land purchased at market value).

- Utilities: Connection fees for Irish Water, ESB, gas, etc. As a guideline/indicator, utility connection costs are generally in the order of €7k per unit.

- Other Costs: Other items that make up the all-in delivery cost can include site investigations/surveys, archaeological requirements, Percent for Art contributions - and will vary from scheme to scheme

To assist in policy development and to provide evidenced based data, in October 2020, the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, published an ‘Analysis of Social Housing Build Programme’ which examined the social housing build programme over the years 2016 to 2019 and considered issues such as Use of Build Delivery; Type of Units, Cost & Speed of Delivery and Cost Efficiency and Market Interaction. The IGEES analysis noted the range of average costs which highlighted the diversity of costs for delivery of new build units across different developments and locations. The paper is available at the following link: www.budget.gov.ie/Budgets/2021/Documents/Budget/Spending%20Review%202020%20-%20Analysis%20of%20Social%20Housing%20Build%20Programme.pdf.

I will be publishing a new Housing Strategy, “Housing for All” shortly and I look forward to working with all stakeholders in delivering on the commitment in the Programme for Government to increase the social housing stock by over 50,000 over the next five years, with an emphasis on new builds, and to ensuring that local authorities are central to delivering housing.

Departmental Data

214. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the average cost to the Exchequer of a social home delivered through the buy and renew scheme in the past 12 months. [38828/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): Since the Buy and Renew Scheme was introduced, local authorities have purchased circa 700 homes for social housing use. Nationally, the average cost to deliver one of these homes under the Scheme is circa €190,000, including the cost for the necessary improvement works to the properties.

I have asked local authorities to increasingly target vacant and derelict properties that can be brought back to use as part of new public housing delivery, particularly where good value for money can be obtained and there is no impact on the local property market and I have assured them of my Department’s support in this regard. Going forward, local authorities will be tackling such vacancy and dereliction through a more construction-led approach to deliver new social homes on exiting sites and to support town centre and urban improvements.

Departmental Data

215. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the average cost to the Exchequer of a social home delivered through the housing agency’s rolling €70 million vacant homes acquisition fund in the past 12 months. [38829/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): An acquisitions fund of €70 million, which is a revolving fund was established with effect from 1 January 2017 with the objective of acquiring some 1,600 units over the period to 2021 for social housing use. This has enabled the Housing Agency to actively engage with banks and investment companies in relation to the acquisition of vacant properties. The fund is replenished by the Housing Agency through the sale of units primarily to the Approved Housing Body (AHB)

sector which are utilising the Capital Advance Leasing Facility (CALF) and the funds received are then recycled back into the fund for future acquisitions.

To the end of March 2021, the Housing Agency have delivered 809 properties using the Fund. In the period from 1 July 2020 to 31 March 2021, the Housing Agency delivered 46 properties with an average spend per unit of €229,022.

Departmental Data

216. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the average cost to the Exchequer of a new traveller specific accommodation unit delivered from the Travellers accommodation budget in the past 24 months.; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38830/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): In accordance with the Housing (Traveller Accommodation) Act 1998, housing authorities have statutory responsibility for the assessment of the accommodation needs of Travellers and the preparation, adoption and implementation of multi-annual Traveller Accommodation Programmes (TAPs) in their areas. My Department's role is to ensure that there are adequate structures and supports in place to assist the authorities in providing such accommodation, including a national framework of policy, legislation and funding.

Traveller-specific projects and developments are focused on group housing schemes and halting sites. This includes meeting Traveller-specific housing needs through a range of mechanisms, such as the provision of mobiles and caravans; the provision of new and the refurbishment of existing halting sites and bays; the provision of new group housing schemes and the extension and refurbishment of existing schemes; the return to use of vacant group housing and the acquisition of properties in certain circumstances.

With the exception of the acquisition of properties and the provision of mobiles and caravans the timeline for the initiation, design, planning approval, tendering and contract management of traveller specific accommodation is generally longer than two years, I understand. Therefore, payments made from the traveller specific accommodation budget over the last 24 months in respect of construction projects would not give a reliable indication of average costs as they may not include all payments from initiation to completion in respect of a sufficient quantity of projects to provide a reliable average cost.

Average costs can however be provided for the last 24 months in respect of the acquisition of homes and the provision of mobiles and caravans. In 2019 the average cost for completed acquisitions was €339,750 and in 2020 it was €228,833. It should be borne in mind that the number of acquisitions is relatively small and the average can vary widely from year to year depending upon the number of acquisitions and the size and location of the homes acquired.

In respect of the provision of emergency mobiles/caravans the average cost to my Department was €9,947 in 2019 and €12,662 in 2020. This however only represents 50% of the actual average cost as local authorities fund 50% of the cost under the emergency replacement scheme. In respect of mobiles/caravans provided during the Covid emergency response, my Department funded 100% of the costs of the provision of mobiles/caravans (including associated costs) and the average cost was €22,180.

Approved Housing Bodies

217. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the total approved borrowing by AHBs for the delivery of social housing in 2020 and 2021; the number of social homes delivered with that borrowing in 2020; and the target number to be delivered in 2022. [38831/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) are making and continue to make an important contribution to social housing delivery. My Department and local authorities administer a number of funding programmes to assist AHBs with the cost of building, buying and leasing new social housing units.

The Capital Advance Leasing Facility (CALF) funding is capital support provided to AHBs by local authorities to facilitate the funding of construction, acquisition or refurbishment of new social housing units, including units acquired through the establishment of the Housing Agency Acquisition Fund and the Mortgage to Rent scheme. My Department can provide CALF funding of up to 30% or up to 40% in the case of the Mortgage to Rent scheme for eligible projects, with the housing units provided to local authorities for social housing use under long-term lease arrangements known as Payment and Availability Agreements. A nominal interest rate of 2% fixed per annum is charged by the local authority on the initial capital amount. Repayments on either the capital or interest are not required during the term of the loan (between 10 and 30 years), although where an AHB chooses to, repayments can be made during the term. At the end of the term, the outstanding capital amount plus the interest accrued, is owed and repayable to the local authority. The local authority issues the CALF monies to the AHB and the local authority, in turn, recoups same from the Department. The remainder of the capital cost is sourced by the AHB through other borrowings to which the local authorities are not party. All proposals for CALF are submitted to my Department by AHBs for review, to ensure that each project complies with the terms of the CALF and that there are sufficient funds available.

My Department does not hold information on the loan agreements under CALF, as the loan agreement, is between the local authority and the relevant AHB. Accordingly, information on the number and value of CALF loans, including the balance owing, is held by the relevant local authorities. The value and term of each loan varies by project.

The table below shows the 2020 delivery and expenditure:

2020 delivery supported by CALF funding

Delivery Stream	Units	Expenditure
AHB-MTR	117	€6.697m
AHB CALF (incl HAA)	2549	€190.22m

The total budgetary allocation for CALF for 2021 is €220m, in addition the 2021 budgetary allocation for the Mortgage to Rent scheme is €23m which also includes provision for the Local Authority Mortgage to Rent Scheme.

It is important to note that owing to the nature of the CALF, delivery of new housing does not always arise in the same year as expenditure and projects delivered under phased programmes may cross a number of payment periods.

Details of the 2021 funding provision for CALF and MTR and related output target are set out in the 2021 Revised Estimates (REV) which is available at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/collection/e20037-revised-estimates/#2021.

Accelerating the delivery of social housing, with an increased emphasis on direct build is a

key objective for my Department, and the Programme for Government, contains an ambitious target of delivering 50,000 social housing homes over the next five years.

Departmental Data

218. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of staff by location and function in each office of his Department nationally by location; if the property is State owned or leased; and the detail of these leases in the case of those properties on a lease in terms of cost, term and next break date. [38861/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The information requested is being compiled and will be forwarded to the Deputy in accordance with Standing Orders.

Housing Schemes

219. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when income eligibility limits for social housing will be increased in counties Cavan and Monaghan given existing limits are low at present and are unrealistic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38890/21]

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

The 2011 Regulations prescribe maximum net income limits for each local authority, in different bands according to the area concerned, with income being defined and assessed according to a standard Household Means Policy.

Under the Household Means Policy, which applies in all local authorities, net income for social housing assessment is defined as gross household income less income tax, PRSI, Universal Social Charge and 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.

A table setting out the details of the three bands and the limits currently applicable in each local authority area is available on the Department's website at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/publication/04c69-social-housing-support-table-of-income-limits/

The income bands are expressed in terms of a maximum net income threshold for a single-person household, with an allowance of 5% for each additional adult household member, subject to a maximum allowance under this category of 10% and separately a 2.5% allowance for each child.

The income bands and the authority area assigned to each band were based on an assessment of the income needed to provide for a household's basic needs, plus a comparative analysis of the local rental cost of housing accommodation across the country. It is important to note that the limits introduced in 2011 also reflected a blanket increase of €5,000 introduced prior to the new system coming into operation, in order to broaden the base from which social housing tenants are drawn, both promoting sustainable communities and also providing a degree of

future-proofing.

Given the cost to the State of providing social housing, it is considered prudent and fair to direct resources to those most in need of social housing support. The current income eligibility requirements generally achieve this, providing for a fair and equitable system of identifying those households facing the greatest challenge in meeting their accommodation needs from their own resources.

However, as part of the broader social housing reform agenda, a review of income eligibility for social housing supports in each local authority area is underway. The review will have regard to current initiatives being brought forward in terms of affordable housing both for purchase and for cost rental.

Housing Schemes

220. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to amend the tenant purchase scheme to enable persons who are in receipt of a pension and have the financial resources to buy out their council home avail of this scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38891/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme came into operation on 1 January 2016. The Scheme is open to eligible tenants, including joint tenants, of local authority houses that are available for sale under the Scheme. To be eligible, tenants must meet certain criteria, including having a minimum reckonable income of €15,000 per annum and having been in receipt of social housing support for at least one year.

The minimum reckonable income for eligibility under the scheme is determined by the relevant local authority in accordance with the detailed provisions of the Ministerial Direction issued under Sections 24(3) and (4) of the 2014 Act. In the determination of the minimum reckonable income, local authorities can include income from a number of different sources and classes, such as from employment, private pensions, maintenance payments and certain social welfare payments, including pensions, where the social welfare payment is secondary to employment income.

In determining reckonable income, the income of all tenants of the house, including adult children that are joint tenants, is included, as is the income of the spouse, civil partner or other partner / co-habitant of a tenant who lives in the house with them, thus ensuring the appropriate level of discount is applied to the purchase price.

The minimum income criterion was introduced in order to ensure the sustainability of the scheme. Applicants must demonstrate that they have an income that is long-term and sustainable in nature. This ensures that the tenant purchasing the house is in a financial position, as the owner, to maintain and insure the property for the duration of the charged period, in compliance with the conditions of the order transferring the ownership of, and responsibility for, the house from the local authority to the tenant.

The financing of any house sold under the Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme is a separate matter from the eligibility criteria for the scheme. If the tenant is deemed eligible under the scheme, he or she may fund the purchase of a house from one, or a combination, of his / her own resources or a mortgage provided by a financial institution or a local authority house purchase loan.

A review of the first 12 months of the Scheme's operation has been undertaken. In addition, the Programme for Government commits to maintaining the right of social housing tenants to purchase their own home with some changes to eligibility. The review and the commitments in the Programme for Government are being examined as part of the work on the broader social housing reform agenda. I expect to be in a position to publish the review and finalise changes to the Scheme once the work on these reform measures is complete.

Approved Housing Bodies

221. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the funding provided to an association (details supplied) to build homes at Oakland Grove, Kildare town has been repaid by the AHB; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38901/21]

222. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the funding provided to an association (details supplied) to build homes at Millstream Avenue, Monasterevin has been repaid by the AHB; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38902/21]

223. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the funding provided to an association (details supplied) to build homes at Fen Grove, Newbridge has been repaid by the AHB; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38903/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 221 to 223, inclusive, together.

The social housing schemes referred to in the questions were funded under my Department's Capital Loan and Subsidy Scheme. This funding model involved local authorities accessing loan finance from the Housing Finance Agency to support approved housing bodies to deliver new social homes.

The loans provided by the Housing Finance Agency to Kildare County Council for these schemes are for a 30 years duration and with support from my Department. These loans are being repaid to the Housing Finance Agency by Kildare County Council in line with the terms and conditions of the scheme .

Question No. 222 answered with Question No. 221.

Question No. 223 answered with Question No. 221.

Housing Schemes

224. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of HAP inspections that took place in County Kildare in 2020; the number of properties that were found deficient; the number that were followed up subsequently; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38904/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The minimum standards for rental accommodation are prescribed in the Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2019. All landlords have a legal obligation to ensure that their rented properties comply with these Regulations. Responsibility for enforcement of the Regulations rests with the relevant local authority.

The HAP scheme is underpinned by the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014. Under section 41 of the 2014 Act, local authorities are required to commence the inspection process within 8 months of HAP support being provided in relation to a particular dwelling, if the dwelling was not already inspected within the previous 12 months. Local authorities carry out HAP inspections as part of their overall private rented inspections programme.

Given the need for inspectors to enter tenants' homes, Covid-19 pandemic restrictions have impacted on the inspection of all rented dwellings. In response to the difficulties caused by pandemic restrictions, some local authorities have been piloting virtual inspections including Kildare County Council. Kildare County Council undertook 533 rental standards inspections of dwellings with HAP-supported tenancies in 2020. Of these 484 were on-site inspections, while a further 49 were undertaken virtually. An increased budget of €10 million (a rise of 300% since 2018) has been approved to facilitate inspections in 2021.

The information requested in respect of the number of HAP properties inspected found to be non-compliant and the number followed-up subsequently is not reported by local authorities to my Department and is not available.

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

The City and County Management Association's (CCMA) Local Authority Services Frameworks for Future Covid-19 Pandemic Response did not permit on-site rental inspections from January 2021 until mid-July. This was in order to protect tenants, landlords and inspectors. The CCMA Framework is developed in accordance with Government public health guidance and restrictions and was recently reviewed in line with updated guidance and restrictions. The revised Framework issued on 13 July 2021 permitted the resumption of rental inspections from 14 July 2021.

Departmental Data

225. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of long-term leasing agreements entered into by each of the Dublin local authorities for 2021 and for any other years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38923/21]

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

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

Local authorities lease dwellings taking account of local need, the suitability of dwellings, sustainable communities considerations and value for money. These properties are allocated to households on the social housing waiting list.

Data on social housing leasing delivery in respect of all local authorities to end Q1 2021 is published on my Department's website at the following link:

www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordable/overall-social-housing-provision.

Departmental Policies

226. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the engagements he has had with other Departments in order to ensure that designations under the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 will involve full consultation with farmers. [38161/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): Since its launch in May 2020, my Department has been in contact with other relevant Departments concerning the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030. The Strategy is an ambitious and far-reaching document which aims to strengthen and improve the protection afforded to habitats and species in the EU as well as put in place measures to restore nature and begin the process of halting biodiversity loss.

The modalities of protection and implementation of the Strategy across Member States, are still under discussion with the European Commission. In this regard, my Department is considering the best means to achieve the targets set out in the Strategy. My officials have already had discussions with the farming representative organisations, as well as the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, and will continue to do so to ensure that the views of the agricultural sector are fully considered as discussions on implementation of the Strategy progress.

Departmental Data

227. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the details of all councils that have submitted an application for serviced sites funding in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39022/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): To date, my Department has issued two broad-based Serviced Sites Fund (SSF) calls for proposals to local authorities. Funding of almost €200 million has been approved in principle in support of 40 infrastructure projects in 14 local authority areas across 9 counties, which will assist in the delivery of almost 4,200 affordable homes for purchase or for rent.

Details of 35 SSF projects which received approval in principle under the two SSF calls to date are available on the Department's website as follows.

Call 1 www.gov.ie/en/press-release/dbc55-minister-murphy-gives-the-go-ahead-for-ten-local-authority-sites-for-affordable-housing-under-the-serviced-sites-fund/

Call 2 www.gov.ie/en/press-release/eaf39-minister-murphy-approves-84m-in-funding-for-25-local-authority-sites-to-support-the-delivery-of-approximately-1770-affordable-homes-nationally-under-the-serviced-sites-fund-ssf/

In addition to these projects, approval in principle has also been given to five further applications for SSF funding, namely, Dublin City Council's projects in Emmet Road and Oscar Traynor Road, Fingal County Council's projects in Ballymastone, Donabate, and Hayestown, Rush and Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council's project in Shanganagh.

Contained within the Programme for Government was a commitment to extend the Serviced Sites Fund. In line with this commitment, a review of SSF progress and projects to date was

undertaken and, having regard to feedback from local authorities, a number of significant improvements to the scheme have now been agreed and communicated to local authorities. These include: renaming it the Affordable Housing Fund and the purpose and function of funding support available will be to assist in the delivery of affordable; expanding the scope of costs covered; taking applications as they are developed on a rolling basis; allowing a direct subvention of the all-in development cost, which may include land purchase costs; and, funding may now exceed the current maximum of €50,000 per affordable dwelling on a stepped scale to €100,000.

The improved and expanded funding options will greatly support delivery of affordable housing by local authorities.

Departmental Projects

228. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the 91 new social homes targeted to be delivered through the build programme in County Mayo in 2021; the number of these 91 houses in relation to which construction has begun; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39023/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Programme for Government includes a commitment to deliver 50,000 new social homes with a focus on new build homes. Subject to the impact of COVID-19, the €3.3bn investment this year would fund delivery of 12,750 new social homes in 2021, including 9,500 new build homes. In December 2020, I issued delivery targets for 2021 to each local authority, with Mayo County Council set a target to deliver 156 new social homes, including 91 new build homes.

The Social Housing Construction Status Report (CSR) published each quarter provides scheme level detail on social housing new build activity in each local authority, including Mayo. The most recent report covers the period up to the end of Quarter 1 2021. It showed that 22 social homes had been delivered, although no new Build homes were complete at the time. The report also shows there are 79 homes onsite across 11 schemes with a further 207 homes at various stages of the design and pre-tender process. The CSR is available at the following link: rebuildingireland.ie/news/minister-obrien-publishes-social-housing-construction-status-report-for-q1-2021/

I have asked all local authorities to work closely with developers, contractors and AHB delivery partners to ensure that the maximum number of new social homes are delivered this year. We will be shortly publishing our new Housing Strategy, Housing for All, which will set out our ambition to deliver more homes across all tenures, with a key focus on the delivery of more social homes.

Departmental Projects

229. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the target 65 social homes to be acquired through leasing arrangement; the number acquired to date; the number of leases made to date that were new builds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39024/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Data on social housing leasing delivery, funded by my Department, in respect of all local authorities to end Q1 2021 is published on my Department's website at the following link:

www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordable/overall-social-housing-provision.

The leasing target for Mayo County Council in 2021 is 65 dwellings. Mayo County Council delivered 16 dwellings under the leasing programme in Q1 2021. Of these dwellings, 8 were delivered under delegated authority by the Council, 6 dwellings were delivered under the Private Mortgage to Rent scheme and 2 dwellings were delivered by the Council under the Repair and Leasing scheme. Information on whether the 8 delegated authority dwellings were newly built is held by the Local Authority.

Data for Q2 2021 is currently being collected by my Department.

Departmental Funding

230. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his Department has provided funding for the Santry river greenway; the projected timeline for the commencement and completion of works on the greenway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39041/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): €750,000 was allocated in respect of the Santry River Restoration proposal under Call 1 of the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) for the initial planning and development of the project. The Santry River Greenway is one sub-project included in the overall project.

While my Department works closely with the successful applicants in respect of project funding, responsibility for the advancement of URDF supported projects through the various stages of planning, development and completion is, in the first instance, a matter for the Sponsoring Agency, in this case Dublin City Council.

In this regard, it should be noted that all URDF supported projects must be carefully developed and managed by the Sponsoring Agency in accordance with the normal conditions and arrangements that apply to public sector managed projects including, exercising appropriate cost control and delivering projects as approved, and in full compliance with the Public Spending Code.

Departmental Funding

231. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his Department has received funding applications from Fingal County Council in relation to the new Meakstown community centre, Dublin 11; the current position; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39042/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department has not received a funding application from Fingal County Council in relation to the new Meakstown community centre, Dublin 11. My Department has no designated funding programme for the provision of such facilities. However, in a limited number of instances such as under the National Regeneration Programme or as part of a wider housing project a contribution towards community facilities may be provided by my Department.

Local Authorities

232. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if local authorities are permitted to support persons with a disability by retrospectively approving grants for works that are in progress or recently completed under the housing grant for people with a disability scheme; the discretion that is available or issue guidelines in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39047/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department provides funding under the suite of Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability, to assist people in private houses to make their accommodation more suitable for their needs. The grants include the Housing Adaptation Grant for People with a Disability, the Mobility Aids Grant and the Housing Aid for Older People, which are 80% funded by my Department, with a 20% contribution from the resources of the local authority. The detailed administration of this scheme including assessment, approval and prioritisation, is the responsibility of local authorities. Local authorities receive an overall allocation, with the responsibility for the apportionment between the three schemes being a matter for each authority given their knowledge of local need.

The framework for the operation of the scheme is laid down in statutory regulations, namely the Housing (Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability) Regulations 2007, and the Housing (Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability) (Amendment) Regulations 2014. A grant may be paid under these regulations where, in the opinion of the local authority, it considers the works reasonably necessary to facilitate the needs of the applicant.

In order for the relevant local authority to determine whether the works are reasonably necessary, a completed application must be submitted by an applicant prior to the commencement of any works, to allow the relevant local authority to inspect the property and confirm that the works are eligible for grant funding. In exceptional cases my Department recognises that there may be an urgency to commence works prior to formal grant approval issuing. In such circumstances, where a local authority has been afforded the opportunity to inspect the property prior to any works commencing, grant approval may, at the discretion of the local authority, issue retrospectively where they are satisfied that the works were necessary and that they needed to be carried out as a matter of urgency.

Local authorities, in administering the grant schemes, should always work with qualifying applicants to ensure they get the most beneficial outcome possible under the terms of the schemes.

Departmental Projects

233. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the public housing project at Shanganagh Castle; the projected timelines for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39048/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Shanganagh Castle is the first large scale development consisting of 100% public housing on public land. It will deliver 597 new homes and a creche on a Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council (DLRCC) owned greenfield site in south County Dublin. The development will include 200 social housing, 306 cost rental and 91 affordable purchase homes. This is also the first large-scale cost rental project in Ireland. The affordable purchase and cost rental homes will be provided in accordance with Affordable Housing Bill 2021, which recently completed all stages in the Oireachtas.

15 July 2021

The site occupies approximately 9 hectares adjacent to Shanganagh Castle, Shanganagh Park and Castle Farm and will be within 10 minutes' walk of the proposed DART station at Woodbrook and Bus Connects route on the nearby Dublin Road (N11).

This project is being developed by the Land Development Agency (LDA) as agents of DLRCC. I am very pleased to advise that the Government recently approved this project to advance to tender stage. The LDA has confirmed that the tender issued to the market on 8 July 2021.

The tender process is expected to complete later this year with construction scheduled to commence early in 2022. The construction programme will likely deliver in three phases with the first homes completing early in 2023.

Building Regulations

234. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he plans to restore pre-2015 apartment standards including in buy-to-lets further to reports that he plans to end the SHD provisions; if he plans to reinstate height limits on apartment developments in line with city and county development plans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39058/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The continued operation of the Apartment Guidelines and the Building Height Guidelines are separate to the Strategic Housing Development (SHD) process and it is important to clarify that at the outset.

National planning guidance provides important clarification and detail of Government policy regarding urban residential development in order to ensure a consistent approach to decision making, irrespective of the particular consent procedure, i.e. whether SHD or otherwise.

Contrary to what is frequently reported, floor area standards for apartments set out in Guidance published by my Department in 2018, and updated in 2020, are not new, and remain unchanged to those set out in previous versions of the guidance, both in 2015 and 2007. Apartment design parameters that the 2007 guidelines addressed only in general terms or not at all, include studio apartments, dual aspect ratios and the number of apartments per stair/lift core.

Accordingly, the 2015 guidelines specified planning policy requirements to address a range of issues such as, inter alia, internal space standards for different types of apartments, including studio apartments; dual aspect ratios; floor to ceiling height; apartments to stair/lift core ratios; storage spaces and amenity spaces including balconies/patios. Since 2015, at least half of all apartments in any development proposal are required to be at least 10% larger than minimum standard size.

Build-to-let was first referenced in 2015 guidance in response to emerging trends, which are envisaged to continue. These include on-going population growth, a move towards smaller average household size, an ageing population and a greater proportion of households in the rented sector. At that time, apartments had become a more common form of dwelling in urban areas, comprising 11% of all occupied households in Ireland and almost one-third of occupied households in Dublin City (Census 2011). By 2016, this had risen to 12%.

In 2018, my Department published updated Sustainable Urban Housing: Design Standards for New Apartments Guidelines for Planning Authorities to respond to the continuing changing housing needs in light of demographics and the dynamics in the urban employment market.

Chapter 5 of the Guidelines address the relatively new and emerging ‘build-to-rent’ sector and set out a number of key distinct characteristics. Build-to-rent projects are usually a single entity investment for long term rental undertaking, comprising individual residential units within the development that are not sold off separately for private ownership and/or subsequent sub-letting individually, which is a key difference from the traditional housing development model. The guidelines provide for planning permission for specific build-to-rent developments to be sought from a planning authority. Build-to-rent developments have specific planning requirements for the provision of dedicated amenities and facilities specifically for residents in terms of communal recreational space, work spaces and cooking/dining facilities as well as a range of other support services such as laundry facilities, concierge, management, repair and maintenance.

Build-to-Rent development forms a relatively small proportion of all planning applications lodged. As of February 2021, 48,397 residential units in total had been approved under the Strategic Housing Development process, comprising 12,991 Houses, 27,624 Apartments and 7,782 Build-to-Rent units. Build-to-Rent continues to make up around 16% of the total residential units approved under the SHD process. The amount of approved Build-to-Rent developments therefore is small. Following a review of co-living, updated guidelines were published in 2020 and I have no plans to further amend the guidelines at this time.

‘Urban Development and Building Height’ Guidelines for Planning Authorities and An Bord Pleanála which were also published by my Department in 2018, pursuant to Section 28 of the Act, support the achievement of compact growth, in line with the National Planning Framework.

In determining planning policy and making planning decisions regarding appropriate building heights, the planning process has to strike a careful balance between enabling long-term and strategic development of relevant areas, while ensuring the highest standards of urban design, architectural quality and place-making outcomes.

Specific Planning Policy Requirement (SPPR) 3(A) of the Building Height Guidelines provides that where an applicant for planning permission sets out how a development proposal complies with the relevant criteria and the assessment of the planning authority concurs, taking account of the wider strategic and national policy parameters, then the planning authority or An Bord Pleanála may approve such development, even where specific objectives of the relevant development plan or local area plan may indicate otherwise.

However, it should be noted that in order to better align decision making processes between local authority development plans and the context of overall Government policy including the promotion of compact urban growth to support the more sustainable use of urban land and existing services, the Building Height Guidelines require planning authorities to identify through statutory plans, areas for increased building height, where appropriate, and to not provide for blanket numerical limitations on height (SPPR1). This work is underway as part of statutory planning processes in many local authority areas.

I am satisfied that these guidelines are necessary and appropriate to give clear context and direction to the overall requirement to promote increased density and building height in appropriate locations within our urban centres. I currently have no plans to review these guidelines.

Vacant Properties

235. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his specific plans and timescale for bringing underused and vacant housing stock into use;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39059/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): My Department is committed to ensuring that existing housing stock is utilised to its fullest extent including providing a targeted, effective and co-ordinated approach to identifying and tackling vacancy across Ireland. There are a range of measures to assist in meeting housing needs by ensuring that our existing housing stock is used to the greatest extent possible. My Department published the National Vacant Housing Reuse Strategy, in 2018, which contains a range of objectives and key actions to be pursued in partnership with stakeholders and agencies across the housing sector to address vacancy in our housing stock. The Strategy is underpinned by a number of supports and guidance put in place by my Department to assist in bringing vacant housing stock back into use including:

- The Repair and Leasing Scheme which assists private property owners, local authority and Approved Housing Bodies to utilise existing vacant housing stock throughout the country as social housing. The scheme is targeted at owners of vacant properties who cannot afford or access the funding needed to bring their properties up to the required standard for a rental property. The maximum loan for property repair available under the Repair and Lease Scheme is €60,000.

- The Buy and Renew Scheme particularly focuses on older vacant homes to help tackle the problem of dereliction and improve the appearance of the community. It provides the option for suitable properties to be purchased by local authorities, rather than leased, if that is the preference of the owners.

- In December 2018 my Department published the Bringing Back Homes Manual for the Reuse of Existing Buildings. Revitalising our main streets through well designed refurbishment of residential units, particularly above shops, could help to rejuvenate smaller town centres and city streets as well as produce more houses.

To further support this work at local authority level, my Department has secured funding for each local authority to support the work of a Vacant Homes Office. The provision of central funding reinforces the capacity of my Department's Vacant Homes Unit to liaise with and seek information/statistics from a dedicated contact point within each local authority. The Vacant Homes Office plays a key role in the co-ordination of this work within each local authority.

The Government set out its housing priorities in the Programme for Government across numerous areas, including homelessness, affordable home ownership, private and social housing delivery, rent reform and planning and my Department is focused on moving those priorities forward.

To deliver on these commitments, my colleague Minister O'Brien will publish a new housing policy and action plan 'Housing for All' this month which will provide a whole of Government approach to housing policy and is at an advanced stage of development at present.

Housing Provision

236. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the actions he plans to deal with the serious problem of land hoarding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39060/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015 introduced the vacant

site levy, which is aimed at incentivising the development of vacant, under-utilised sites in urban areas. The Act provides that the levy shall apply to vacant sites exceeding 0.05 hectares on residential land or regeneration land, as designated in local development plans, which meets the relevant criteria set out in the Act. Under the Act, planning authorities were empowered to apply a vacant site levy of 3% of the market valuation of relevant properties which were listed on local authority vacant site registers in 2018, which relevant owners were liable to pay in January 2019. The levy rate has since been increased to 7% for sites on local authority vacant site registers from 2019 onwards.

All levies due on an individual site remain a charge on the land concerned until all outstanding levies due are paid. Accordingly, under the vacant site levy provisions, there will be a cumulative effect associated with not activating a site for development purposes for each year that a site remains vacant or idle.

Furthermore, the Derelict Sites Act 1990 imposes a general duty on every owner and occupier of land to take all reasonable steps to ensure that the land does not become, or continue to be, a derelict site. The Act also imposes a duty on local authorities to take all reasonable steps, including the exercise of appropriate statutory powers, to ensure that any land within their functional area does not become, or continue to be, a derelict site.

The Derelict Sites Act 1990 confers significant powers upon local authorities, including requiring owners or occupiers to take appropriate measures on derelict sites, acquiring derelict sites by agreement, or compulsorily, and applying a derelict sites levy on derelict sites. It is a matter for local authorities to determine the most appropriate use of the legislation within their respective functional areas.

Under the Act, local authorities are required to maintain a derelict sites register, which includes the name and address of each owner and occupier, where these can be ascertained by reasonable enquiry, of any land which, in the opinion of the local authority, is a derelict site. Under section 8(5) of the Act, a copy of the derelict sites register for any local authority can be inspected at the offices of that authority during office hours. Members of the public can engage with their local authority in relation to addressing individual derelict sites in their local areas.

Under the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2018, the derelict site levy was also increased from 3% to 7% of the market valuation of relevant sites with effect from January 2020. This levy is applied annually for as long as relevant sites remain derelict. The changes in the rate of the derelict site and vacant site levies is intended to ensure that the levies have more meaningful impact and that the powers of local authorities in tackling dereliction and vacancy are strengthened for the purpose of bringing relevant sites into productive use, thereby facilitating urban regeneration and development in designated areas while also combatting land hoarding.

I continue to keep the relevant provisions under review.

Vacant Sites

237. Deputy Róisín Shortall asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will give consideration to the introduction of new arrangements for the collection of the vacant site levy whereby the Revenue Commissioners would take over responsibility for collection based on a self-certification system in order to bring these sites into use for housing development and in view of the inability of local authorities to collect these levies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39062/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): Under the vacant site levy provisions in the Urban Regeneration and Housing Act 2015, planning authorities were empowered to apply a vacant site levy of 3% of the market valuation of relevant properties which were listed on local authority vacant site registers in 2018, which relevant owners were liable to pay in January 2019. The rate of the levy increased to 7% for sites listed on local authority vacant sites register from 2019 onwards which site owners became liable to pay in January 2020.

My Department proactively engages with local authorities with a view to ensuring that the vacant site levy achieves its full potential in terms of bringing concerned sites into productive use. In this regard, my Department issued Circular Letter PL 03/2021 on 8 March 2021 requesting the submission of a progress report on the collection of the levy by each local authority. The progress reports received from planning authorities in response to Circular PL 03/2021 are currently being examined in greater detail by my Department to consider, amongst other things, what further implementation supports may be required. My Department will continue to engage proactively with local authorities to ensure that all vacant site levies due are paid and that the measure can achieve its full potential.

In this context, as provided for in the Programme for Government, the legislation is being kept under review.

Question No. 238 withdrawn.

Passport Services

239. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when a passport will issue to a person (details supplied) in view that the application was received by the passport office on 19 April 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38749/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): With regard to the specific application about which the Deputy has enquired, the Passport Service was in contact with the applicant on 10 June to provide an update on the status of the passport application and requesting applicant to submit the correct supporting documentation.

The Passport Service scaled up operational levels on 4 May 2021, in line with the phased easing of restrictions set out in “COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 – The Plan Ahead”.

Passport Online will continue to be the priority channel given the efficiencies that are in-built into the system for both the applicant and the Passport Service. The processing of an online application is up to four times as fast as a paper application. In addition, the use of Passport Online can facilitate social distancing, given that a renewal application for an adult does not require the signature of a witness.

Passport Online can be accessed by first time applicants, both children and adults, in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Great Britain, Europe, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA. All Irish citizens, including children, can use the online system to renew their passports from anywhere in the world.

The Passport Service has a great deal of experience in dealing with peaks in demand, and we are confident, taking into account measures to ensure a safe workplace, that the Passport Online applications on hand can be cleared in six to eight weeks.

Passport Services

240. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a passport application will be expedited for a minor (details supplied) in view of the fact that the application was received by the passport office on 19 April 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38750/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): With regard to the specific application about which the Deputy has enquired, the Passport Service was in contact with the applicant on 10 June to provide an update on the status of the passport application and requested to submit the correct supporting documentation.

The Passport Service scaled up operational levels on 4 May 2021, in line with the phased easing of restrictions set out in “COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 – The Plan Ahead”.

Passport Online will continue to be the priority channel given the efficiencies that are in-built into the system for both the applicant and the Passport Service. The processing of an on-line application is up to four times as fast as a paper application. In addition, the use of Passport Online can facilitate social distancing, given that a renewal application for an adult does not require the signature of a witness.

Passport Online can be accessed by first time applicants, both children and adults, in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Great Britain, Europe, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA. All Irish citizens, including children, can use the online system to renew their passports from anywhere in the world.

The Passport Service has a great deal of experience in dealing with peaks in demand, and we are confident, taking into account measures to ensure a safe workplace, that the Passport Online applications on hand can be cleared in six to eight weeks.

Question No. 241 withdrawn.

Question No. 242 withdrawn.

Departmental Staff

243. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of staff, by location and function, in each office of his Department nationally; if the property is State owned or leased; and the detail of these leases in the case of those properties on a lease in terms of cost, term and next break date. [38852/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Please see below in tabular form my Department’s offices within the State, their addresses, their associated functions, and the number of staff for each building.

My Department’s office accommodation in the State, a mixture of State-owned and leased premises, is provided by the Office of Public Works. My Department does not maintain ownership or lease details of these properties.

Office	Address	Functions	Staff Numbers
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Iveagh House	79-80 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2	Minister's Office, Head Office Functions, Policy Functions	266
Clare Street	22-25 Clare Street, Dublin 2	Policy Functions	54
Clonmel Street	2-3 Clonmel Street, Dublin 2	Policy Functions	53
Harcourt Street	76-78 Harcourt Street, Dublin 2	Corporate Support Functions	213
Hatch Street	13-15 Lower Hatch Street, Dublin 2	Policy Functions	71
Archives – Finglas	Jamestown Business Park, Jamestown Road, Finglas, Dublin 11	Archives	8
Passport Office – Mount Street	Knockmaun House, 47 Mount Street, Dublin 2	Passport Service	148
Passport Office – Balbriggan	Fingal Bay Business Park, Balbriggan, Co. Dublin	Passport Service	204
Passport Office – Cork	1A South Mall, Cork	Passport Service	107
Limerick	Riverstone House, 23-27 Henry Street, Limerick	Policy and Corporate Support Functions	106

EU Membership

244. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if enlargement of the EU has been discussed at recent meetings of the Foreign Affairs Council; the present status of the applications of candidate countries for membership of the EU; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38885/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland recognises the value of EU accession as a transformative driver for stability and peace in the Western Balkans. We have always been, and will remain, a strong supporter of enlargement of the European Union, provided that candidate countries met the necessary conditions for membership. In this regard, we welcome the reform agenda underway in the countries of the Western Balkans and the progress that has been made in the areas of security and rule of law.

Ireland was one of nine EU Member States which called for a strategic discussion on the Western Balkans to be held at the Foreign Affairs Council in May, as we recognised that there is an urgent need to address the increasing frustration in the region, particularly with accession. In recent discussions, Ireland has stressed the centrality of the enlargement process to stability and peace in the Western Balkans and urged the current blockage on beginning negotiations with both North Macedonia and Albania to be resolved as soon as possible. We have also emphasised the need for the EU to improve the way in which it communicates in the Western Balkans – this has been a long-running issue but the pandemic has brought this problem into sharp focus.

EU Ministers were unable to reach agreement on the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia on 22 June at the General Affairs Council. Both countries have met all of the requirements to open negotiations, but Bulgaria vetoed the proposal to hold Intergovernmental Conferences, due to ongoing bilateral issues with North Macedonia.

Intergovernmental Conferences with Serbia and Montenegro were held in Luxembourg on 22 June. These were the first Intergovernmental Conferences held under the revised enlargement methodology (designed to boost the credibility and dynamism of the process). No decisions to open new chapters were taken for either Serbia or Montenegro, with further work required in the “Fundamentals” cluster (rule of law, economic criteria and public administration reform) needed before this can occur.

Bosnia-Herzegovina has made limited progress over the last year and faces significant challenges to ensure implementation of the Commission’s 2019 recommendations in the areas of democracy, rule of law, fundamental rights, and public administration reform. These are not insignificant, when added to the ongoing migration issues facing the country, which require greater political cohesion. Progress in these areas must be seen before the opening of accession negotiations with Bosnia-Herzegovina can be considered.

Kosovo is a potential candidate for Membership of the EU. The Commission’s report on Kosovo in 2020 noted that the political situation in Kosovo remains challenging though some measure of stability has now been restored following recent elections. Rule of law, judicial reform, public administration reform, organised crime and normalisation of the relationship with Serbia are just some of the areas that must be comprehensively addressed in order for Kosovo to advance on its European path. It will be some time before Kosovo can qualify as a candidate country.

Ireland will continue to actively support the enlargement process and accession negotiations to the EU as well as the individual European perspectives of the Western Balkans countries.

Passport Services

245. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will take steps to expedite a passport application by a person (details supplied) which was submitted many months ago; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38916/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Passport applications are only valid for six months primarily due to International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) regulations on the requirement for a recent photograph. The ICAO is a UN specialised agency which defines in detail the required format for a passport.

Where additional documentation has been requested and has not been received within this timeframe, these applications are cancelled. This timeframe also ensures that a refund of the fees can be processed electronically where required. If the refund is not made electronically within six months then it can take up to 12 months to process a refund by bank transfer.

With regard to the specific application about which the Deputy has enquired, an official from the Passport Service was in contact with the applicant on 14 July 2021. The application has been refunded and the applicant has been invited to submit a new application.

In the event that any applicant has urgent or emergency reasons for requiring a passport, they should contact the Passport Service’s Customer Service Hub, by WebChat, to make the Passport Service aware of their situation.

Foreign Policy

246. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the measures he plans to take at EU level to assist in bringing an end to Israel's illegal settlement activity in the West Bank and East Jerusalem; the actions Ireland will take as a member of the UN Security Council to facilitate the fulfilment of the right to self-determination of the Palestinian people in view of his support for the agreed position of Dáil Éireann that Israel's settlement activity in the West Bank and East Jerusalem amounts to unlawful de facto annexation and taking into account in this context the commitment in the programme for Government to give leadership within the EU and to work to ensure that all parties respect their obligations under international law; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38919/21]

247. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the additional pre-requisites that will be required before Ireland can give recognition to the state of Palestine given the pledge in the Programme for Government to honour Ireland's commitment to recognise the state of Palestine believing that in doing so Ireland will progress efforts to reach a two-state solution and in view of the unanimous view of Dáil Éireann that Israel's settlement activity in the West Bank and East Jerusalem amounts to unlawful de facto annexation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38920/21]

248. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps Ireland will now take to advance the Middle East peace process, to build consensus at EU level and to take a more proactive approach in supporting a negotiated two-state solution and lasting peace taking into account the recent unanimous motion of Dáil Éireann in accepting that Israel's settlement activity in the West Bank and East Jerusalem amounts to unlawful de facto annexation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38921/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 246 to 248, inclusive, together.

Ireland's position on the Middle East Peace Process and the situation in the occupied Palestinian territory is informed by international law, respect for human rights and the goal of a Two-State solution through a negotiated peace agreement.

Ireland has been consistently vocal in its opposition to settlement expansion and annexation. The Government's support for the recent Dáil motion reflected our grave concern about the scale and character of settlements and their negative impact.

We will continue to proactively raise these issues at EU level, in national and EU statements at the UN Human Rights Council, the UN General Assembly and the UN Security Council, and in our bilateral contacts.

On 12 July I joined EU Foreign Affairs Ministers in a first meeting with the new Israeli Minister for Foreign Affairs, Yair Lapid. During our discussion I emphasised the need to respect international law and underlined that settlement expansion and the ongoing threats of evictions, demolitions and violence against Palestinians, all of which undermine prospects for peace, must be stopped. I called on Israel to engage constructively in a process for peace and to do all it can to address the humanitarian situation and support reconstruction in Gaza.

Ireland remains firmly committed to a negotiated two-State solution based on international law, relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions and agreed parameters.

I have been clear in my engagement with both Israel and the Palestinian Authority of the commitment of this Government to advancing a Two-State solution for a resolution of the Israe-

li-Palestinian conflict. Rebuilding confidence and a political track for negotiations is essential. The EU has an important role in this effort, including through revitalising the Quartet, which is being supported by the new EU Special Representative on the Middle East, Sven Koopmans.

The Programme for Government states that the Government will “Honour our commitment to recognise the State of Palestine as part of a lasting settlement of the conflict, or in advance of that, when we believe doing so will progress efforts to reach a Two-State solution or protect the integrity of Palestinian territory”. As I have stated previously, I would be prepared to recommend to the Government early recognition by Ireland of a State of Palestine, if and when it might be helpful, and this is a matter which I discuss with EU colleagues.

Question No. 247 answered with Question No. 246.

Question No. 248 answered with Question No. 246.

Passport Services

249. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when a passport is likely to be issued for a person (details supplied); the reason the due date on the online passport tracker has not been updated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38929/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): With regard to the specific application about which the Deputy has enquired, the Passport Service was in contact with the applicant on 14 July to provide an update on the status of the passport application and requested necessary documentation not originally provided by applicant.

The Passport Service scaled up operational levels on 4 May 2021, in line with the phased easing of restrictions set out in “COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 – The Plan Ahead”.

Passport Online will continue to be the priority channel given the efficiencies that are in-built into the system for both the applicant and the Passport Service. The processing of an online application is up to four times as fast as a paper application. In addition, the use of Passport Online can facilitate social distancing, given that a renewal application for an adult does not require the signature of a witness.

Passport Online can be accessed by first time applicants, both children and adults, in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Great Britain, Europe, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA. All Irish citizens, including children, can use the online system to renew their passports from anywhere in the world.

The Passport Service has a great deal of experience in dealing with peaks in demand, and we are confident, taking into account measures to ensure a safe workplace, that the Passport Online applications on hand can be cleared in six to eight weeks.

Post Office Network

250. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Defence the plans to bring the old Curragh post office building back into use; if it can be made available for community use; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38894/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The building in the Defence Forces Training Centre, which housed a Post Office, was in use until 2019. The future use of this

building will be informed by the Defence Forces plans for the long term configuration of this military installation. When such proposals are developed, any building works, if required, will be incorporated into the Defence Forces Built Infrastructure Plan.

School Transport

251. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education if she is satisfied that sufficient school bus capacity will be available for the forthcoming school year in view of difficulties that arose in some areas for the 2020-21 school year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38729/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The School Transport Scheme is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. In the current school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who complete the application and payment process on time are accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis only and are offered seats where capacity exists after all eligible children have been catered for.

My Department recently commenced a review of the School Transport Scheme. Following commencement of this review in February 2021 and a detailed analysis and report conducted by the Technical Working Group in the interim period, the Steering Group recently presented me with its initial interim report, a report on eligibility with an examination of issues for mainstream pupils relating to the nearest and next nearest school.

Following consideration of this report, I have approved the extension of temporary alleviation measures which allow for students who are otherwise eligible for school transport but are attending their second nearest school and have applied and paid on time. This will result in transport being provided for an estimated additional 1,800 post-primary pupils in the 2021/2022 school year, who otherwise would not be accommodated under the scheme. This arrangement will be in place for the coming school year pending completion of the full review of the School Transport Scheme.

Wider considerations relating to the objectives of the scheme and the criteria for eligibility will take place in the next phase of the review which is now underway. The Steering Group will continue to report to me on an interim basis as the review progresses, with a view to presenting a final report with recommendations on the future operation of the Department's School Transport Scheme.

Home Schooling

252. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Education if all tutors that participated in the supplementary home tuition scheme from January 11 to April 30 2021 have at this point been paid; if not, the number who have been paid; the number who remain unpaid; the time-frame for unpaid home tutors to receive a payment; and the average length of time home tutors have been waiting to receive a payment. [38806/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): In recognition of the fact that remote learning is particularly challenging for children with complex special educational needs, my Department put in place the supplementary programme in February to support the education and/or care needs of pupils with complex needs during the period of extended school closures and phased reopening. It commenced on 11 February for primary students and on 22 February for eligible post-primary students.

My Department's approach was intended to be flexible so as to maximise the number of students participating. To this end the hours could be used by families at any time before 30 April 2021, including during the Easter holidays.

The programme is structured in similar way to my Department's home based summer programme. Parents engage either a teacher or an SNA in a private arrangement. When the programme is complete parents return a grant claim form to my Department. The closing date for receipt of completed claim forms was 14 May 2021.

The processing of applications for the Supplementary Programme is broadly similar to that of the home based summer programme. As with the home based summer programme, there is a very high volume of claims for the supplementary programme and as such the timeline for payment of teachers/SNAs is similar.

Processing of the approx. 13,800 applications is ongoing and the Department is working towards an initial pay date of 5 August 2021.

Departmental Staff

253. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Education the number of staff, by location and function, in each office of her Department nationally; if the property is State owned or leased; and the detail of these leases in the case of those properties on a lease in terms of cost, term and next break date. [38859/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The number of staff in my Department by location and function is set out in the attached table. The renting/leasing of all offices in my Department, with the exception of office space which a small number of Department staff share with the state-owned Kilkenny Education Centre, is managed by the Office of Public Works (OPW) which acts as an agent for all Government Departments in this regard. As such, the terms, cost and duration of these leases is a matter for the OPW.

[Table]

School Transport

254. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education if a school bus service will be provided for students attending secondary school in Johnstown, County Kilkenny, from Ballyragget, County Kilkenny; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38863/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The School Transport Scheme is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. In the current school year over 114,100 children, including over 14,700 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

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All children who are eligible for school transport and who complete the application and payment process on time are accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation. Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis only and are offered seats where capacity exists after all eligible children have been catered for.

My Department recently commenced a review of the School Transport Scheme. Following commencement of this review in February 2021 and a detailed analysis and report conducted by the Technical Working Group in the interim period, the Steering Group recently presented me with its initial interim report, a report on eligibility with an examination of issues for mainstream pupils relating to the nearest and next nearest school.

Following consideration of this report, I have approved the extension of temporary alleviation measures which allow for students who are otherwise eligible for school transport but are attending their second nearest school and have applied and paid on time. This will result in transport being provided for an estimated additional 1,800 post-primary pupils in the 2021/2022 school year, who otherwise would not be accommodated under the scheme. This arrangement will be in place for the coming school year pending completion of the full review of the School Transport Scheme.

Wider considerations relating to the objectives of the scheme and the criteria for eligibility will take place in the next phase of the review which is now underway. The Steering Group will continue to report to me on an interim basis as the review progresses, with a view to presenting a final report with recommendations on the future operation of the Department's School Transport Scheme.

Curaclam Scoile

255. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den Aire Oideachais cén comhfhreagras a bhí idir a Roinn agus an Chomhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta maidir le forbairt na sonraíochta le haghaidh an dá chúrsa Gaeilge don Ardteistiméireacht ag leibhéal T1 agus T2; ar lorgáidh treoir ón Roinn maidir leis an bpróiseas a leanfaí i mbun na hoibre seo; más rud é gur lorgáidh, cén treoir a lorgáidh agus cén treoir a tugadh; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [38864/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Is é ról na Comhairle Náisiúnta Curaclaim agus Measúnachta (NCCA) forbairtí sa churaclam agus sa mheasúnú a threorú agus comhairle a chur ar an Aire Oideachais a bhfuil an fhreagracht deiridh air as an gcuraclam a chinneadh.

I ndáiríre, oibríonn mo Roinn go dlúth leis an NCCA chun curaclaim a fhorbairt ar gach leibhéal. Bunaíonn an NCCA grúpaí forbartha chun tabhairt faoi obair shonrach i réimsí curaclaim nó ábhair. Tá gach grúpa forbartha comhdhéanta d'ainmnithe ó eagraíochtaí múinteoirí agus bainistíochta, ó Choimisiún na Scrúduithe Stáit i gcás an oideachais iar-bhunscoile, páirtithe leasmhara ardoideachais chomh maith le hainmní ó mo Roinn. Bhí ainmní ag mo Roinn ar an nGrúpa Forbartha um Ghaeilge na hArdteistiméireachta ó bunaíodh é in 2018, a d'oibrigh leis an ngrúpa chun an dá dhréachtsonraíocht atá ar fáil faoi láthair le haghaidh comhairliúcháin phoiblí a fhorbairt.

Le linn an phróisis fhorbartha dhá bhliain, rinneadh athbhreithniú, plé agus moltaí rialta ar dhréachtsonraíochtaí L1 agus L2 do Ghaeilge na hArdteistiméireachta, agus rinneadh moltaí chuig Bord NCCA don tSraith Shinsearach agus ina dhiaidh sin chuig Comhairle an NCCA, a d'fhorghas na dréachtsonraíochtaí le haghaidh comhairliúcháin phoiblí. Tá ainmnithe ag mo

Roinn freisin ar Bhord an NCCA don tSraith Shinsearach agus ar Chomhairle an NCCA.

D'iarr an NCCA nuashonruithe ó mo Roinn roinnt uaireanta le linn an phróisis fhorbartha (2018-2020) agus an phróisis chomhairliúcháin ar shaincheistanna lena n-áirítear rogha agus tacaíochtaí chomh maith le bearta spreagtha.

Chuir mo Roinn a cuid tuairimí maidir leis na scoileanna ar cheart na dréacht-sonraíochtaí a dhíriú orthu in iúl don NCCA agus, sular bunaíodh an Roinn Breisoideachais agus Ardoideachais, Taighde, Nuálaíochta agus Eolaíochta, gur thionóil sí cruinnithe le Cumann Ollscoileanna na hÉireann (IUA) agus leis an gCumann Ardoideachais Teicneolaíochta (THEA). Scrúdaíodh ag na cruinnithe sin raon na gclár tríú leibhéal le riachtanais iontrála Gaeilge, glacadh na gclár Oideachais Tosaigh Múinteoirí i measc iarrthóirí Gaeltachta agus bearta atá ar fáil cheana féin chun tacú le rochtain mac léinn ar bhreisoideachas agus ar ardoideachas.

Is Dréachtdoiciméid iad na sonraíochtaí agus dá bhrí sin is féidir go n-athrófar iad ag brath ar thoradh an phróisis chomhairliúcháin a leathnaíodh go dtí an 30 Samhain 2021. Ina theannta sin, chuir an NCCA in iúl don Roinn go bhfuil sé ar intinn aici athbhreithniú luath-achtacháin a dhéanamh ar leibhéal L1 agus L2 den tSraith Shóisearach a bheidh gaolmhar leis an obair atá ar siúl ag an gComhairle.

School Accommodation

256. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education further to Parliamentary Question No. 435 of 1 June 2021, if there has been further progress in advancing a building project at a school (details supplied) in view of the concerns of the wider school community regarding delays in having this much-needed additional and upgraded accommodation provided; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38892/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy is aware, the long-term accommodation needs of the school in question have been identified and agreed with the school management authority.

The brief for building project is currently being developed by my Department's Professional and Technical staff and once finalised will be issued to the school authority for delivery in the earliest possible timeframe.

School Accommodation

257. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Education her plans to address the shortage of school places in the areas of Newbridge and Kildare town; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38893/21]

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

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

pated to have increased enrolments for the period to 2027.

The level of demand volume across school planning areas with an increasing net requirement ranges from small to medium increases that are likely to be accommodated by existing schools through to significant projected growth that may require additional provision.

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

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

Where capacity issues arise it may not be as a result of lack of accommodation but may be driven by the following factors:

- Duplication of applications – pupils have applied for a place to a number of schools in the area School of choice – pupils can't get a place in their preferred school while there are places in other schools in the town/area

- Some towns/areas have single sex schools and while places are available in the school they are not available to all pupils

- External draw – pupils coming from outside the local area

Until these issues are discussed with the relevant school authorities the true extent of any capacity issue will only become known. Similar to the process adopted in advance of the current academic year, my Department engaged with patron bodies, including in the areas in question, to identify particular capacity requirements for the forthcoming year(s) which may necessitate action.

Department is aware of increasing pressures and demand for additional post-primary school places in a number of school planning areas (SPAs) including South Kildare.

There are a number of building projects planned for South Kildare including the following:

- Curragh Post Post-Primary School - It is intended that significant additional capacity to address this demand will be provided by the planned new 1,000 pupil building for the existing Curragh post primary school. The school has an enrolment of 145 pupils in 2020/21. As the Deputy may be aware, a new site is required for the replacement Curragh post-primary school. The project is also proposed to address demographic need in the Kildare/Curragh/Newbridge school planning areas. Officials in my Department are presently in advanced negotiation with a landowner in respect of the acquisition of a suitable site to cater for the permanent needs of the previously announced 1,000 pupil post primary school that will serve the Kildare/Newbridge/Curragh school planning areas. My Department also continues to work closely with officials from Kildare County Council in order to progress the transaction, under the Memorandum of Understanding between my Department and Local Authorities for the acquisition of school sites with a view to securing a suitable site for this school. Should agreement on the proposed acquisition be reached, the process will advance to the conveyancing stage when draft contracts are prepared and legal due diligence is undertaken in respect of the proposed transaction. It would be expected at that stage that the project to deliver the new school accommodation can simultaneously progress to architectural planning stage. As this negotiation is live and given

the commercial sensitivities associated with land acquisitions generally, I am not in a position to comment further at this time.

- St Conleth's Community College have agreed to enrol an additional 1st year class for the 2021/22 school year and the Patron has agreed to the expansion of the school to cater for a total capacity of 1,000 pupils. This school has an enrolment in 2020/21 of 588 pupils.

- The accommodation brief for the major project for Cross and Passion College, Kilcullen has also been increased to cater for a 1,000 pupil school to provide for increased demographic growth. This school has an enrolment in 2020/21 of 838 pupils in 2020/21.

- Patrician Secondary School Newbridge – the accommodation brief for this school has increased to 1,000 pupils to provide for increased demographic growth. This school has an enrolment in 2020/21 of 903 pupils.

School Accommodation

258. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the immediate steps that are being taken to ensure the provision of a school place as close as possible to the family home suitable to meeting the requirements in the case of a child (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38983/21]

259. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the efforts that are being made to ensure the provision of an appropriate educational place for a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38984/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 258 and 259 together.

I can confirm to the Deputy that the relevant support services, including NEPS and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) recently met with the parents in this case. All involved are working towards ensuring that the student can access a suitable placement as soon as possible.

I can also assure the Deputy that the NCSE will continue to be available to support this family throughout this process.

Question No. 259 answered with Question No. 258.

Social Welfare Rates

260. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Social Protection the increase seen or expected in the back to school allowance as a result of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [39027/21]

273. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Social Protection the increase seen or expected in the back to school allowance as a result of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [39054/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 260 and 273 together.

The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA) scheme provides a once-

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off payment to eligible families to assist with the costs of clothing and footwear when children start or return to school each autumn. The Government has provided €53.5m for the scheme in 2021 which operates from June to September.

The allowance is payable for eligible children between the ages of 4 and 17 in respect of whom a qualified child increase is being paid. It is also payable to those between the ages of 18 and 22 who are in full-time second level education and in respect of whom a qualified child increase is being paid.

Similar to previous years, the majority of customers were awarded BSCFA automatically and these customers were notified of their award by the 21 June. This year, over 111,000 families have been approved for the BSCFA in respect of 204,000 qualified children automatically. Payments amounting to approximately €42m are issuing to these families this week.

Customers who have not received notification of an automated payment will need to apply for BSCFA online on www.mywelfare.ie. Customers who are experiencing issues applying online for the BSCFA should phone the BSCFA contact centre on 071 9193318 or 0818 11 11 13 or email bscfa@welfare.ie and an officer will help the customer apply online or, if necessary, will issue an application form directly to the customer.

The COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment is a qualifying payment for the BSCFA. Recipients of this payment will also need to satisfy all the other qualifying conditions in order to qualify.

The scheme opened to new applications on 21 June. In the first 3 weeks, 18,600 applications have been received. In the first 3 weeks in 2020, 23,600 applications were received. This represents a year on year decrease of applications received in the first 3 weeks of 21%. However, the online application opened on the 21 June this year compared to 6 July last year. It is too early at this stage to assess whether there will be an increase in applications due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The closing date to apply for this year's BSCFA is 30 September 2021.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Insurance

261. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will provide the social insurance contribution record of a person (details supplied) in Ireland; if such contributions can be taken into account in determining pension entitlements in the United Kingdom; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38747/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Records Section of my Department is responsible for the maintenance and issuing of social insurance records in respect of social insurance contributors to the Irish social insurance system.

I can advise the Deputy that if the personal public service number (PPSN) of the person concerned is provided to the Records Section via the dedicated TD mailbox, ContributionHistoryRecords@welfare.ie, a statement of social insurance contributions will be issued promptly to the person concerned.

I am aware that an officer in the Records Section has contacted the Deputy's office to advise of the position.

As to the determination of pension entitlements under the UK social security system, the Pension Service in that jurisdiction would be in a position to advise on how a contributor's Irish social insurance contributions would be treated for pension purposes there.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Code

262. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will examine the inequitable treatment of persons on invalidity pension that wish to move on to partial capacity benefit and to establish themselves as self-employed (details supplied); if these significant disincentives to taking up employment will be examined and addressed; and if the feasibility of applying similar rules to invalidity pension and partial capacity recipients as those that apply to persons on disability allowance will be examined. [38792/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): A person may apply for whichever of the Department's schemes that best fits his or her needs and circumstances. He or she must satisfy the entitlement criteria and conditions for receipt to be granted payment.

Disability Allowance (DA) is a means-tested payment for people with an injury, disease or disability that has continued, or may be expected to continue, for at least one year and, as a result of this disability, the person is 'substantially restricted' in undertaking work that would otherwise be suitable. Legislation provides that the DA means test takes account of the income and capital/assets of the person (and spouse/partner, if applicable) applying for the scheme. The scheme is also subject to a habitual residency requirement. In addition, where a person is in receipt of DA and they are earning above €140 per week from employment, their earnings are assessed as means, initially at 50% (for earnings between €140 and €350) and then at 100% for earnings above €350 per week.

Invalidity Pension (IP) is a pension paid to people who are 'permanently incapable of work because of illness or disability. It is based on a claimant's social insurance contributions and medical conditions and is not means tested.

Persons in receipt of Invalidity Pension who wish to enter or re-enter employment or self-employment can apply for the Partial Capacity Benefit (PCB) scheme. PCB extends the Invalidity Pension scheme to respond to the reality that some people with disabilities have a capacity to engage in employment while continuing to need to receive some income support from the State. The personal rate of payment of PCB is based on a medical assessment of a person's restriction, regarding their capacity for work. After the medical assessment, if a person's disability is rated as moderate, severe or profound their previous payment continues at 50%, 75% or 100%, respectively. PCB allows people to continue to receive a percentage of their Invalidity Pension payment while working. In addition, there is no restriction on the number of hours worked and there is no restriction on earnings. A person who participates on the PCB scheme may return to an Invalidity Pension payment if, for example, the employment ceases or if the person cannot continue to work.

The Back to Work Enterprise Allowance (BTWEA) scheme offers support for people who are long-term unemployed and who are interested in self-employment as a route to entering the labour market. The scheme plays a vital role in supporting the development of new enterprises and supporting the first steps into self-employment for the long term unemployed. Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension and Blind Pension are qualifying payments for receipt of the scheme. No paid employment is allowed outside the business as the customer is expected to

devote 100% of their time to the business venture.

A person who avails of the Back to Work Enterprise Allowance scheme retains a percentage of their social welfare payment rate for up to 2 years. Applicants receive support through their DSP Intreo Case Officer, who will refer them to their Local Development Company (LDC) who assists them in discussing options and to explore the viability of their business idea. Once accepted onto the scheme, the person retains 100% of their original payment in year one and 75% in year two. Customers in receipt of Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension and Blind Pension may retain any secondary benefits they were in receipt of prior to participation in the scheme.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Social Welfare Benefits

263. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Social Protection further to Parliamentary Question No. 878 of 15 June 2021, when a person (details supplied) in County Cork will receive a decision on their carer's allowance. [38813/21]

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.

Where a person in receipt of full-rate CA has a qualified child they are entitled to claim an IQC at the following rates:

- Full-rate IQC is paid with CA where the applicant is parenting alone
- Half-rate IQC is paid with CA if the applicant has a spouse, civil partner or cohabitant.

The person concerned is currently in receipt of full rate CA. According to the Department's records, the person concerned was married and living with her spouse. Therefore, IQCs were paid at half rate in respect of three qualified children.

Correspondence dated 24 May 2021 was received containing an affidavit confirming that the person concerned is separated and parenting alone.

A review of her claim commenced on receipt of this information.

The outcome of the review is that the person concerned has been awarded full rate IQC with effect from 24 September 2020.

Arrears of allowance from 24 September 2020 to 7 July 2021 issued to her nominated bank account on 8 July 2021.

The person concerned was notified of this outcome and of her right of review and/or appeal.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Code

264. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social Protection the situation for un-

documented workers in the hospitality, retail and service sector who have been in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment until now who may be called in for intermittent precarious days and hours of work and who may not be entitled to a jobseeker's payment thereafter if they don't receive ongoing days or hours employment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38835/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) was introduced as an emergency measure in the exceptional circumstances of Covid-19 to help cushion the financial impact on people temporarily laid-off work as a direct result of public health measures mandated by the Government. To date, over €8.2 billion has been paid to support people on the scheme.

As restrictions are lifted and the economy gradually reopens, the requirement for exceptional measures is diminishing and it is important that we transition from emergency pandemic supports to standard social welfare terms and entitlements.

The jobseeker schemes are the main income supports provided by my Department for people who are unable to find full time work. Jobseeker's Benefit is a social insurance payment based on a person's social insurance contributions paid from employment. Where a person does not qualify for Jobseeker's Benefit, they may be eligible for support under the means-tested Jobseeker's Allowance scheme. A person may work for up to three days per week and still receive a jobseeker payment.

The Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme offers a safety net within the overall social welfare system and may provide assistance to those whose means are insufficient to meet their own needs and those of their dependents. Supports provided under this scheme can consist of a basic weekly payment, a weekly or monthly supplement in respect of certain expenses, as well as single exceptional needs payments (ENPs) and urgent needs payments (UNPs).

I trust that this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Pensions Reform

265. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of the publishing of the report by the Commission on Pensions; and when she plans to publish the report of the Commission (details supplied). [38846/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Pensions Commission was established in November 2020 to examine the sustainability of the State Pension system and the Social Insurance Fund, in fulfilment of a Programme for Government commitment. The Commission was also asked in its Terms of Reference to examine the issue of retirement ages in employment contracts that are set below the State Pension qualifying age, and how to further accommodate long-term carers in the State Pensions system.

This is a major and complex body of work. The Commission has had 17 meetings, and held a public consultation process including a Stakeholder Forum. Details of the Commission's work can be found on its website, pensionscommission.gov.ie.

The Chairperson of the Commission has written to me to advise that the Commission plans to meet at the end of July to finalise its draft report. Some time will also be required after that to complete the report's production.

I look forward to receiving the report in due course. I anticipate that I will bring the Report

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to Government shortly after the summer recess. The intention is to publish the report at that time. In accordance with the Programme for Government, the Government intends to take action having regard to the recommendations of the Commission within six months of receiving the report.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Departmental Data

266. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of staff by location and function in each office of her Department nationally by location; if the property is State owned or leased; and the detail of these leases in the case of those properties on a lease in terms of cost, term and next break date. [38848/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Please find two tables below.

[Tables]

Widow's Pension

267. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the widow's, widower's or surviving civil partner (contributory) pension will be adjusted to make long-term partners eligible to receive the payment. [38872/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Widow's, Widower's and Surviving Civil Partner's pension is paid to the husband, wife or surviving civil partner of a deceased person and is available to those who satisfy the necessary PRSI contribution conditions, either on their own record or on that of the deceased spouse or civil partner, provided the applicant is not cohabiting.

The legal context governing life-partnership relationships such as marriage or civil partnership is set out in various Civil Partnership, Marriage and Family Law Acts. Entering into a marriage or civil partnership is a legal act, which confers both rights and obligations on both parties that do not exist in law between cohabiting couples. Widows, widowers and surviving civil partners, who become bereaved, therefore, lose someone who had legal duties towards them, and the social welfare code recognises this by providing a pension to them, subject to certain conditions.

It was for these reasons that the social welfare supports for widows and widowers were extended to surviving civil partners from 1 January 2011, when the provisions of the Civil Partnership and Certain Rights and Obligations of Cohabitants Act 2010 came into force.

Awarding widows pensions, or a similar benefit, to people who are not legally widows, widowers or surviving civil partners would involve a significant income support policy change and could also be very costly. The basis on which a person would become entitled to such a pension, would require significant consideration and raise complex legal and administrative challenges. Accordingly, any changes to eligibility criteria for widow's pension would need to be considered both in an overall policy and in a budgetary context.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Payments

268. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will disregard maintenance payments in the assessment of the working family payment in circumstances in which the court ordered payer is not making payments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38897/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Working Family Payment is a weekly tax-free payment available to employees with children. It gives extra financial support to people on low pay.

Currently, there are approximately 10,500 Working Family Payment customers who are in receipt of some form of maintenance. The average maintenance payment is €58.60 per week. As there is a housing disregard of €95.23 and only half the maintenance over this amount is assessed for income purposes, the majority of maintenance payments are already being disregarded.

If a maintenance payment ceases, the Working Family Payment customer should initially contact the Courts Service to inform them that they are no longer getting maintenance. However, as the pandemic is resulting in ongoing disruption to court services, the situation continues to be monitored to ensure that our customers do not have to face any further difficulties or hardship at this time.

Last year, the Government established a Child Maintenance Review Group, chaired by former Circuit Court Judge Catherine Murphy, to examine certain issues in relation to child maintenance in Ireland including the treatment of maintenance payments within the social welfare system. The Group's report is expected later this year.

Social Welfare Schemes

269. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons awaiting determination of their application for a domiciliary care allowance; the current wait time; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38898/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Domiciliary Care Allowance (DCA) section has a target of processing 90% of all new applications within a ten week timeframe. This target has been consistently achieved and exceeded every month since April 2020. As at the 30th June 2021, there were 1,852 claims awaiting decision and the average processing time was 8.5 weeks.

Processing times can be affected by the volume of applications received in a given timeframe and the availability of staff resources at that time. Claim processing activity is prioritised and the management of the DCA section in the Department monitor this activity on an ongoing basis and respond to any changes which impact on processing times.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Schemes

270. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons awaiting determination of their application for the children's allowance; the current wait time;

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and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38899/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Child benefit is the principal way the State assists families with the costs of raising children. It is paid in respect of all qualified children up to the age of 16 years, or to the age of 18 in respect of children who are in full-time education or who have a disability.

The Department invites child benefit applications by contacting the parents of new born children, following receipt of a notification of a birth registration from the General Registrars Office (GRO) or auto processes the payment for the new baby where child benefit is already in payment to the family. The Department also processes claims where the children have been born outside the state or where a family move to Ireland.

There are currently 1,670 undecided Child Benefit claims on hand, 1,294 of those claims have been received in the last two weeks. The average processing time for a Child Benefit claim is 2 to 3 weeks.

The restoration of birth registration services following the recent cyber attack on the HSE has resulted in the Department dealing with a higher number of claims than normal in recent weeks. The processing of the delayed birth registrations will be prioritised by the Department as soon as they are received. Any arrears of payments due on claims will be included with the first payment of Child Benefit.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Pension Provisions

271. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will furnish a detailed explanation for the significant difference in content of information in relation to the correspondence furnished to a person (details supplied) on 3 September 2020 and 1 July 2021, pertaining to their entitlement to a State pension (contributory); the reason for the difference in the treatment of their reckonable credited contributions for 2005 and 2006 in July 2021 when compared to record and treatment thereof furnished in September 2020; if same will now be reviewed further; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38915/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The person concerned reached pension age on 9 February 2020. According to the records of my Department, they have a total of 898 qualifying full-rate paid and credited contributions from their date of entry into insurable employment on 8 November 1971 to end-December 2019.

This equates to a yearly average of 18 contributions, which gives an entitlement to a standard State pension (contributory) at 65% of the maximum rate. As the person concerned is financially better off on their current social welfare payment, their State pension (contributory) claim was withdrawn in favour of the higher payment. They were notified in writing of this decision on 8 January 2020.

Following a requested review, the person's yearly average was recalculated as 20 which gives an entitlement to a standard State pension (contributory) at 85% of the maximum rate. The person's current social welfare payment is still higher than their State pension (contributory) entitlement. They were notified in writing of this decision on 3 September 2020.

The person concerned contacted my Department on 8 June 2021 to advise that they wished to avail of their State pension (contributory).

The matter was referred to my Department's Central Records Section for a review of the person's contribution record for the 2006 contribution year. One contribution had been recorded for 2006 at full-rate PRSI (Class A) which is reckonable for pension purposes. Change of status credits had consequently been awarded to the person's record for the 2005 and 2006 contribution years. However, the 2006 Class A contribution was found to have been incorrectly awarded and was subsequently amended to Class D, corresponding to the modified rate payable during the person's prior public service employment. Modified social insurance contributions are not reckonable for State pension purposes.

The change of status credits which were awarded for 2005 and 2006 were therefore no longer applicable and were removed. The person's yearly average of 18 contributions and State pension (contributory) entitlement of 65% of the maximum rate is correct.

While State pension (contributory) was awarded to the person concerned on 1 July 2021 at 65% of the maximum rate, they are financially better off to remain on their current social welfare payment. An officer from my Department has been in contact with the person in this regard. I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Departmental Communications

272. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of scam calls reported to her Department in view of the surge in fraudulent calls claiming to be from her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [39037/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department is aware of many reports that people have received one or more scam calls purporting to be from officials from this Department.

These fraudulent phone calls and text messages claim to be from the Department and are seeking personal information e.g. PPS number / Bank Account details. Other institutions have also been the target of similar fraudulent phone calls and texts e.g. Banks, Attorney General's Office, An Post. The recipient of the scam call may or may not be in receipt of a social welfare payment.

The focus of the Department's response has been on the provision of information to the public so that they are aware that these calls are fraudulent and that the Department would not ask for details such as bank account details over the phone.

In addition, the Department is in regular contact with An Garda Síochána in relation to these scams. Where personal information has been shared by a member of the public and the Department is made aware of this, appropriate measures are taken to ensure that fraudulent claims are not made.

The Department is continuing to remind people to be alert to possible scam phone calls or scam text messages they may receive from a person claiming to be a Government official.

This is done via:-

- The Department's social media channels and includes a video alert from Minister Humphreys.

- All Government Departments have been alerted to the scam and asked to share our social media messages on their social media channels also.

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- A notification about such scams is published on the Department's website.
- Raising staff awareness by placing a notification about such scams on the Department's internal staff communications site.
- A warning message on the Department's main phone number that a caller hears immediately on calling the Department.
- A Press Release specifically on these scams & the inclusion of a paragraph about such scams in the weekly PUP press release.
- A public information campaign to raise awareness of fraudulent calls and texts ran from 8 May to 14 May and from 22 May to 28 May. It featured a 60 second radio ad warning about potential scam calls claiming to be from the Department. It was broadcast on RTÉ Radio, Newstalk, Today FM, and a wide range of regional radio stations.

Question No. 273 answered with Question No. 260.

Social Welfare Schemes

274. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a one parent family allowance will be restored in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [32814/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): In line with standard practice, a review of One Parent Family Payment entitlement was undertaken in the case of the person concerned on 22/4/2021. The person concerned was asked to provide relevant information/documentation in order to complete this review. Payment was suspended when means could not be determined as certain information regarding a number of bank accounts was not provided by the person concerned when requested.

Payment was reinstated on 21/06/2021 when the required information was provided.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

International Protection

275. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the way the national standards for accommodation offered to persons in the protection process have operated since coming into effect at the start of 2021. [38796/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The National Standards, which came into force in January 2021, address a range of issues relating to accommodation; food and catering; individual, community and family life; health and wellbeing; governance; and meeting the special reception needs of applicants seeking international protection.

Independent living is central to the National Standards. The International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) defines independent living as accommodation which provides self-catering facilities to enable residents to choose and prepare their own meals; and the availability of separate living room space for families to conduct normal family life outside of a bedroom environment. Laundry facilities for the use residents must also be available. Of the 46

direct provision accommodation centres around the country, 35 provide the full suite of independent living facilities. 11 of these centres are mostly or entirely comprised of self-contained, own-door accommodation units. In addition, nine of the 24 emergency centres that are currently in use provide cooking facilities and two provide own-door accommodation.

Compliance with the National Standards can only be adequately measured through on-site assessment. My Department is currently working with HIQA to establish an independent monitoring mechanism to assess accommodation centres against the National Standards. My officials are currently examining whether legislative change will be required to put this in place. It is hoped that HIQA will be able to begin monitoring shortly. In the meantime, the current system of inspections will continue.

My officials are also developing a tender process to secure additional accommodation for families and single people seeking international protection. A central aim of this process is to improve the quality of the accommodation and services offered to international protection applicants during the transition period while the new model set out in the White Paper to End Direct Provision and to establish a new International Protection Support Service is being put in place. Any new accommodation centres secured through this process will be required to comply with the National Standards and, more broadly, to align with the aims of the White Paper.

Children in Care

276. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if funding restraints are affecting the availability of placements for young person's moving within the children's residential network; if funding issues are affecting the availability of placements for young persons who are aging out of care or in aftercare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38834/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): Funding restraint is not the issue with placing or moving children within the children's residential network. In some instances, the challenge is the availability of suitable placements to meet the specific complex needs of a small number of young people.

Over the past number of years there is an increasing number of eligible young people who are in receipt of Aftercare support and who require appropriate placement or accommodation. Additional funding was allocated in 2021 to bring the funding in line with 2020 demand, and while demand is still increasing the cost is met within the overall Tusla budget. Numbers and costs are monitored closely and reported nationally for monitoring and reporting.

Asylum Seekers

277. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his attention has been drawn to the asylum seekers being moved from Cork to Letterkenny despite the impact this will have on integration (details supplied); if they are being moved for own-door accommodation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38837/21]

279. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if it will be ensured that all children and families in direct provision being moved from congregated hotel-style living are housed in own-door or independent living accommodation as close as possible to the community in which they have been residing. [38869/21]

280. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will suspend the compulsory moving of five families from a direct provision congregated setting (details supplied) until own-door or independent living accommodation can be located within the community they have been residing in. [38870/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I propose to take Questions Nos. 277, 279 and 280 together.

As the Deputies will be aware, I have recently announced my intention for the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) of my Department to cease its reliance on temporary emergency accommodation for International Protection applicants by the end of this year; and moving residents to own door accommodation wherever possible. The provision of own-door accommodation represents a substantial improvement in terms of allowing families to attain independence, privacy and develop a normal family life while within the system.

These moves are in context of the wider Government commitment to end Direct Provision by the end of 2024 as set out in the “White Paper to End Direct Provision and to establish a new International Protection Support Service” that I published earlier this year. The provision of own-door accommodation for all applicant families is the goal of the White Paper.

The use of temporary emergency accommodation had to regrettably be continued for longer than anticipated due to the advent of the pandemic and the overriding need to ensure all residents could be accommodated in as safe an environment as possible. As a result some families, for whom the intention was that the use of temporary emergency accommodation would be brief, spent longer periods in this type of accommodation.

I understand that moving to a new location is difficult for any family, particularly those in the International Protection Process, but moving from emergency accommodation to own door accommodation will provide greater independence and privacy for the families in accommodation more appropriate to their needs.

Despite the efforts of IPAS officials, there is at present no other suitable accommodation for these families available to IPAS in the Munster region.

It is a requirement for IPAS to re-accommodate people from temporary emergency accommodation to dedicated IPAS accommodation centres as soon as appropriate vacancies become available, and as such no formal appeals process exists, however IPAS officials do engage with families individually where concerns emerge about an intended move. IPAS encourage any family with specific concerns about moving to their new accommodation to contact IPAS directly. The dedicated Resident Welfare team will be on hand to provide support throughout the moves.

I am absolutely committed to improving conditions for International Protection applicants in the accommodation provided by IPAS. To this end, IPAS a new dedicated Customer Service unit to engage with IPAS residents, as well as a new Resident’s Welfare Team were established earlier this year.

Departmental Properties

278. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of staff by location and function in each office of his Department nationally by location; if the property is State owned or leased; and the detail of these leases in the case of those properties on a lease in terms of cost, term and next break date. [38858/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth’s offices are located as follows:

- 2nd and 3rd floors, Block 1, Miesian Plaza, 50 - 58 Baggot Street Lower, Dublin 2; and
- 2nd and 3rd floors, Montague Court, 7 - 11 Montague Street, Dublin 2.

The number of staff by location and function in each office of my Department is set out below.

Note that the staffing numbers provided refer solely to direct employees (headcount) of the Department as of 30 June 2021.

Function	Location	Number of staff
Minister’s Office, Management Board, Project Management Office, Internal Audit	2nd and 3rd floors, Block 1, Miesian Plaza 50 - 58 Baggot Street Lower Dublin 2	28
Child Policy & Tusla Governance Division	As above	41
Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare Division	As above	80
Adoption and Mother and Baby Homes Division	As above	26
Corporate and Business Support Division	As above	81
Youth, Governance, Communications and Research Division	As above	109
International Protection, Integration and Equality	2nd and 3rd floors, Montague Court 7 - 11 Montague Street Dublin 2	99
Total Departmental Staff		464

The leasing arrangements in place for the Departmental buildings are as follows:

Block 1, Miesian Plaza, 50 - 58 Baggot Street Lower, Dublin 2: The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) occupy the second and third floors at this leased property. The leaseholder is the Office of Public Works. DCEDIY does not pay rent on this property and does not have the current information on the lease in terms of cost, term and next break date.

Montague Court, 7 - 11 Montague Street, Dublin 2: DCEDIY currently holds the leases on the second and third floors at this property. These leases transferred to my Ministerial role from the Minister for Justice under a transfer of functions in October 2020. The current rent on these leases is €795,655 net per annum, excluding service charges and other costs. The rent has been agreed for the remainder of the terms of these leases, which expire on 31 May, 2025.

Question No. 279 answered with Question No. 277.

Question No. 280 answered with Question No. 277.

Domestic Violence

281. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the actions the State is taking to achieve its obligations under the Istanbul Convention to provide one space per 10,000 women in domestic violence refuges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38905/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The response to Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence (DSGBV) is a cross Departmental and multi-agency issue with overall policy coordinated by the Department of Justice. Separately, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has responsibility in terms of capital provision for the development of new refuges.

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) sets out signatory obligations but does not set out a standard or recommended number of refuges. With regard to the provision of shelter for victims, a policy document “Combating Violence Against Women: Minimum Standards for Support Services”, published by the Council, references two possible standards depending on the types of service provision in place. Tusla has applied the standard of one shelter space per 10,000 head of female population, with specific mechanisms for measuring population and calculation of shelter spaces. This standard applied by Tusla, reflects the community-focused integrated response for victims, where community-based organisations and outreach supports are in place alongside refuges.

Tusla is finalising its Review of the Provision of Accommodation for Victims of Domestic Violence. The Review has examined the current level of refuge provision, evidence of demand for services and unmet need, and analysis of proximity to refuge by local communities. It will recommend a future course of actions for Government with regard to current and future accommodation requirements for victims of domestic violence.

These recommendations will be considered in conjunction with an audit of the responsibility for DSGBV across Government that was published by Minister O’Gorman and Minister Naughton on the 14th July. Actions on future investment in refuge provision will be included in the Third National Strategy for DSGBV, to be published at the end of 2021.

Adoption Services

282. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of staff who process requests in the Adoption Authority of Ireland; and if the service is operating at full capacity following pandemic related restrictions. [38910/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): As the subject matter of the Deputy’s question relates to an operational matter for the Adoption Authority of Ireland, I have referred the matter to them for a direct reply.

Departmental Strategies

283. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the outcomes of each of the 52 actions outlined in the Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019; the actions which have been successfully completed ongoing and yet to be initiated, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the

matter. [39025/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): The information that has been requested by the Deputy is being compiled. An answer will be forwarded to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Apprenticeship Programmes

284. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the status of the apprenticeship incentivisation scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38730/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): The Apprenticeship Incentivisation Scheme comprises a €2,000 payment when employers register a new apprentice, followed by an additional €1,000 payment one year later where that apprentice is retained. The intention of the scheme is to ensure that apprenticeship will play a key part in supporting economic recovery following COVID-19.

The Scheme was initially approved under the July Jobs Stimulus for employers registering apprentices after the 1st March 2020. It had been anticipated that the initial duration and subsequent expansion of the Scheme to mid-2021 would cover the re-opening period. However this has not transpired meaning that employers have not had the opportunity to avail of the benefits of the Scheme to the extent envisaged during the re-opening phase.

The scheme has been extended on two occasions and will now include all apprentices registered to the end of this year. Employers are sent an electronic application form once they have registered an apprentice. As of 1st July employers will be requested to confirm that they have advertised the apprentice role on www.apprenticeshipjobs.ie or else provide a rationale why they have not advertised the post.

The scheme has supported a significant recovery of apprentice registrations in 2020 and into 2021 and has enabled apprentice registrations to remain on a par with registrations for 2019. By end May 2021 there were 2,296 new registrations compared to 1,493 at end May 2020 and 2,329 by end May 2019.

Since the launch of the Scheme, payments in respect of 4,307 apprentice registrations have been made to date with a current spend of €8.614m.

The establishment, funding and success of the scheme is a strong demonstration of the Government’s commitment to the development and growth of apprenticeship in Ireland, which will be sustained and intensified through the implementation of the Action Plan for Apprenticeship.

Covid-19 Pandemic

285. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the supports planned to integrate students back on campus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38731/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The Government has committed to planning for a significant increase in on-site attendance in the tertiary education sector in the next academic year.

Following intensive consultation with sectoral stakeholders and Government approval, I published A Safe Return: Plan for a safe return to on-site Further and Higher Education and Research in 2021/22.

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. Institutions and providers in the sector have committed to ensuring that all learners across all areas have significant scheduled on-site learning in the forthcoming year.

The protection of and support for students and learners is one of the central tenets of the Plan whose purpose, among others, is to enable maximum provision of on-site activities, support the ongoing public health requirements, and support the ongoing needs of students and learners

Institutions and providers are currently progressing with their own detailed planning and work for a comprehensive return to on-site activity. This will include planning for orientation, re-orientation and transitions programmes to assist students in familiarising or re-familiarising themselves with the on-site environment and learning resources. Issues around supports for students returning to campus, and the need for resources to support these students, have been discussed by the Student and Learning Wellbeing and Engagement Working Group.

In the Plan, my Department commits to developing a funding proposal for agreement with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to support the sector in responding to specific costs and particular issues arising from the impact of the pandemic on for the tertiary sector and students. The proposal, building on the funding provided in 2020 under the Covid support package is intended to help enable the return to substantial on-site activity under this Plan.

Covid-19 Pandemic

286. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science when English languages schools are permitted to reopen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38824/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Following the publication of COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery: The Path Ahead and in keeping with the Government’s objective of moving to a return to safe onsite provision in higher and further education, extensive planning has been undertaken by the sectoral stakeholders of the Covid-19 Working Group for the English language education (ELE) sector to prepare for the safe resumption of limited, small group, in-person provision to cater for the needs of this sector’s existing cohort of students currently in the State. 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.

On the basis of these plans and subject to relevant conditions, limited in-person activity may begin to resume for the current cohort of students from 19th July 2021 where it is safe to do so.

In preparing to undertake the resumption of in-person activity, ELE providers should particularly be aware of and take account of the following key factors:

- There is no deterioration in the public health situation nor changes to public health advice/ measures that would impact on this activity.

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- The resumption of this activity is exclusively to cater for the needs of the existing cohort of ELE students currently in the State.

- This step should be taken in consultation with each provider's staff and students.

- Subject to relevant conditions, providers may opt to remain closed, to provide blended learning or to continue operating wholly online.

- There continues to be **no basis for the recruitment of new international students** that may seek to travel to the State at this time.

All existing restrictions and public health guidance with appropriate protective measures and limited congregation will need to be followed, supported by the sectoral reopening protocols and adaptation framework, to facilitate and ensure the safe return to some classroom-based activity for this cohort of students.

The resumption of in-person activity is a key stepping stone on the pathway to recovery for the ELE sector in Ireland. My Department looks forward to continued productive engagement with stakeholders to support the development of further plans which will enable the return of international student recruitment and the full re-opening of the sector in due course, aligned with public health guidelines.

Departmental Data

287. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of staff by location and function in each office of his Department nationally by location; if the property is State owned or leased; and the detail of these leases in the case of those properties on a lease in terms of cost, term and next break date. [38853/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The number of staff in my Department by location and function is set out below. All the offices that my Department occupies are managed by the Office of Public Works (OPW) who has responsibility for renting / leasing of offices and acts as an agent in this regard for Government Departments. As such, the terms, costs and duration of these leases is a matter for the OPW.

Location	Number of Staff (*FTE)	Function
Shared with the Department of Education in Cornamaddy, Athlone, Co. Westmeath	4 (3.5)	Further Education & Training

Location	Number of Staff (*FTE)	Function
Shared with the Department of Education in Marlborough Street, Dublin 1	111 (106.23)	Central Policy, Communications, European Social Fund (ESF)/European Globalisation Adjustment Fund (EGF) Policy & Operations, Finance, Further Education & Training, Higher Education - Governance, Higher Education - Policy and Reform, Innovation, Research and Development, International Section, Minister of State's Office, Organisational Design and Development, Secretary General's Office, Skills, Planning and Enterprise
Shared with a number of Government departments/offices in Leeson Lane, Dublin 2	12 (12)	Ministerial Office and support staff
Shared with the Department of Education in Portlaoise Road, Tullamore, Co. Offaly	40 (36.43)	Capital Investment, Higher Education - Equity of Access, Higher Education - Funding and Governance

* Fulltime equivalent

Apprenticeship Programmes

288. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of apprentices employed by each local authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39012/21]

289. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of apprentices employed by each State and semi-State body; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39013/21]

290. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of apprentices employed in each university, technological university and institute of technology; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39014/21]

293. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of registered employers in the apprenticeship programme; the number of active employers in the programme; the number of apprenticeship participants by type and county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39018/21]

296. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of apprenticeships that have been furloughed; the number that have been made redundant as a result of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39026/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): I propose to take Questions Nos. 288 to 290, inclusive, 293 and 296 together.

The information requested by the Deputy is being compiled. An answer will be forwarded to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Question No. 289 answered with Question No. 288.

Question No. 290 answered with Question No. 288.

Apprenticeship Programmes

291. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of apprentices waiting to access off-the-job training on a county basis in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39015/21]

295. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the apprenticeship training available by apprenticeship type in each county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39021/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): I propose to take Questions Nos. 291 and 295 together.

The number of apprentices waiting to access off-the-job training at the end of June 2021 broken down on a county basis is set out in Table 1. Over 800 apprentices are scheduled to commence Phase 2 off the job training over the coming weeks.

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-07-15_pq291a-15-07-21_en.xlsx “>Table 1]

The details provided in the attached Table 2 is for the 25 craft apprenticeships where training is currently provided. This has been presented by location and programme provision. Details attached give an overview of the Education and Training Board for Phase 2 and Institute of Technology / Technical Universities for Phases 4 and 6 craft apprenticeship programmes.

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-07-15_291b-15-07-21_en.xlsx “>Table 2]

Additional information in relation to post 2016 apprenticeships is being compiled, and will be forwarded to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Further and Higher Education

292. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of full-time further education students by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39017/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Below is the information requested by the Deputy in relation to the number of full-time students who have taken up Further Education and Training (FET) courses in each county. The information supplied refers to the 2020 calendar year and the county in which the

course is delivered.

[Attachment]

Question No. 293 answered with Question No. 288.

Further and Higher Education

294. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of green certificate places that will be provided by Westport FET in September 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39019/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): The ‘Green Cert’ is a course that meets the requirement to be a trained farmer as outlined in Section 81AA of the Stamp Duty Consolidation Act 1999 as updated by Revenue eBrief No. 090/19 on 02 May 2019.

Green certificate courses are offered throughout the country by An Teagasc who are the main provider of agriculture courses throughout the country. A provision is also offered by Mayo Sligo Leitrim Education Training Board (MSLETB) in Westport College of Further Education. MSLETB has confirmed to my office that in September 2021 they will have 240 places for students in the part-time Special Purpose Award programme and a total of 60 places available in the two full time provisions in Agriculture and Horticulture.

MSLETB/Westport College of Further Education have committed to offer potential students further advice and guidance on training options available in MSLETB and via other providers e.g. Teagasc and other ETBs.

Question No. 295 answered with Question No. 291.

Question No. 296 answered with Question No. 288.

Student Accommodation

297. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to the fact that a university (details supplied) is requesting over €3,000 in up-front payments for on campus accommodation for the coming academic year despite the Government currently enacting legislation to prohibit same; and if he plans to intervene. [39033/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): As the Deputy is aware, legislation has passed the Oireachtas which restricts 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 one month’s rent at a time. This Bill was signed into law on the 9th July.

My officials met with representatives from the university sector in relation to this bill on a number of occasions, and the universities are aware of the restrictions on up-front payments and the requirement to allow monthly payments. According to the information available to me, the University of Limerick has made the necessary adjustments and this has been reflected on their website which states that the payment due on 31st July is the first month’s rent and a €500

deposit.

Further information on this should be sought from the universities themselves as accommodation payments as a matter for them in line with their institutional autonomy, and I have no direct role in this matter.

Citizenship Applications

298. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Justice the status of a citizenship application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38727/21]

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 7 October 2020. The application continues to be processed with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision in due course.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their application without delay. 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.

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.

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.

Closed-Circuit Television Systems

299. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Justice her plans for the expansion of Garda CCTV in Cork city to deter criminal activity; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38732/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The rollout of community CCTV schemes across the country has benefitted many communities, helping people to feel safer in their local areas. It is a priority of mine to ensure that community groups continue to be supported in their valued contributions to their local CCTV schemes while ensuring sufficient and proportionate oversight of statutory data protection considerations.

Since 2017, my Department has administered a grant aid scheme supporting groups wishing to establish a community-based CCTV system in their area. Eligible groups, including community groups and local authorities nationwide, can apply for grant aid of up to 60% of the total capital cost of a proposed CCTV system, up to a maximum total of €40,000.

The scheme was extended in 2019 to cover not only new CCTV systems but also to allow

funding applications for extension or upgrade of existing community CCTV systems which are incomplete or obsolete. Applicants can now also seek a once-off grant of up to €5,000 for minor maintenance costs.

The scheme is open for applications from all counties. 34 schemes have been funded to date with commitments of almost €940,000 made to these schemes across 10 counties and I can confirm that funding continues to be available for 2021. Further details are available to download from my Department's website and support and guidance is available to help interested groups through a dedicated email address.

The Deputy will be aware that community-based CCTV is governed by the Garda Síochána Act 2005 (Section 38(3)(c)) and the Garda Síochána (CCTV) Order 2006 (SI 289 of 2006). This legal framework sets out a number of safeguards, requiring that any proposed community CCTV scheme must:

- be approved by the local Joint Policing Committee,
- have the prior support of the relevant local authority, which must also act as data controller, and
- have the authorisation of the Garda Commissioner.

This is the legal basis for all community CCTV schemes, regardless of how they are funded. These key legal requirements have operated since 2006.

As the Deputy will be aware, the general scheme of the Garda Síochána (Digital Recordings) Bill was published on 27 April. This new bill will also cover CCTV authorised in local communities by the Garda Commissioner. I intend to conduct a further review of the terms and conditions of the current scheme to bring it into line with the proposals for this new legislation, and in keeping with the commitment in the Programme for Government. Once this review is completed, appropriate guidance will issue to An Garda Síochána on the control and supervision of CCTV systems. This new legislation is intended to replace Section 38 of the Garda Síochána Act 2005.

Prison Service

300. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice the number of complaints made by prisoners' family members to the Irish Prison Service in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38780/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The information sought is not readily available, it will need to be collated and verified by officials within the Irish Prison Service. When this data is to hand I will contact the Deputy directly.

Naturalisation Applications

301. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Justice the position regarding an application by a person (details supplied) considering that no reply has been forthcoming; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38784/21]

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 11

December 2017. The application continues to be processed with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision in due course.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their application without delay. 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.

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.

My Department aims to respond to all Oireachtas Mail immigration queries within 10 working days. I regret that it was not possible to do so on this occasion, while the necessary enquiries were being made with the citizenship team. However, I understand that a response has now issued and I hope the Deputy will agree that the facility generally works well and provides very timely responses.

Covid-19 Pandemic

302. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Justice if there are plans for an easing of restrictions on passengers who are also partners of Irish nationals travelling into the country (details supplied). [38847/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): From 16 June 2021, my Department lifted certain country specific and temporary entry and transit visa restrictions which were brought into effect on 28 January 2021. As a result of this decision, nationals from South Africa, Brazil and some South American countries are no longer visa required.

The criteria and requirements for visa required countries are kept under regular review in consultation with the Minister for Foreign Affairs. For nationals from a visa required country, long stay visa and preclearance applications are currently being accepted and processed by my Department.

It remains the position that my Department is not currently accepting any short stay visa applications, except for cases that fall under the Emergency/Priority criteria set out below. The suspension of short stay applications will continue to be reviewed in consultation with the relevant authorities in the coming weeks as public health restrictions on international travel and the measures introduced as part of the Government's efforts to interrupt the transmission of COVID-19 are eased.

The Priority/Emergency cases that will continue to be accepted and processed include the following:

- All long stay employment applications, supported by a work permit or atypical permission;
- patients travelling for imperative medical reasons;
- transport workers or transport service providers, including drivers of freight vehicles carrying goods for use in the territory as well as those merely transiting;

- pupils, students and trainees who travel abroad on a daily basis and Third-country nationals travelling for the purpose of 3rd level study;
- Join Family applications;
- Preclearance applications from de facto partner of an Irish national, de facto partner of a Critical Skills Employment Permit holder, or of a non EEA researcher on a Hosting Agreement and family members looking to join a UK national in Ireland;
- persons travelling for imperative family* or business reasons;
- Persons entitled to avail of the provision of the EU Free Movement Directive;
- diplomats, staff of international organisations and people invited by international organisations whose physical presence is required for the well-functioning of these organisations, military personnel and police officers, and humanitarian aid workers and civil protection personnel in the exercise of their functions;
- passengers in transit;
- seafarers;
- journalists, when performing their duties.

Departmental Properties

303. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Justice the number of staff by location and function in each office of her Department nationally by location; if the property is State owned or leased; and the detail of these leases in the case of those properties on a lease in terms of cost, term and next break date. [38854/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The number of staff by location and function in each office of my Department is provided in the table below, along with the information requested on whether each property is State owned or leased. The Deputy will appreciate that the costs of leases are commercially sensitive.

Buildings occupied by Department of Justice	Number of Staff	Function	Leased/Owned	Occupied by
51 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, D02 HK52	265	Corporate, Transparency, Criminal Policy, Criminal Governance, Criminal Service Delivery, EU Affairs	Owned by OPW	Fully occupied by DoJ
13/14 Burgh Quay, Dublin 2, D02XK70	219	Immigration Service Delivery, Operations, Corporate	Owned by OPW	Shared with An Garda Síochána
Timberlay House, 79/83 Lower Mount Street, Dublin 2	157	Corporate, Immigration Service Delivery	Leased by OPW	Fully occupied by DoJ

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Buildings occupied by Department of Justice	Number of Staff	Function	Leased/Owned	Occupied by
Border Management Unit, Dublin Airport	151	Immigration Service Delivery	Owned by DAA	Shared accommodation
Second Floor, Bishop's Square, Redmond's Hill, Dublin 2, D02 TD99	151	Corporate, Civil Legislation, Criminal Legislation, Civil Policy, Operations	Leased by OPW	Shared accommodation
Floors 4 and 5, 26-30 Chapter House, Abbey Street Upper, Dublin 1, D02 C7W6	111	Corporate, Immigration Service Delivery	Leased by OPW	Shared with the Public Appointment Service who are the main tenant
7/8 Ely Place, Dublin 2.	111	Corporate, Criminal Service Delivery	Leased by OPW	Shared building
Financial Shared Services, Deerpark Road, Killarney, Co. Kerry, V93KH28	105	Corporate	Owned by OPW	Shared with PSSC
6-7 Hanover Street, Dublin 2, D02W320	81	IM&T, Immigration Service Delivery, Operations, Corporate	Owned by OPW	Fully occupied by DoJ
Government Offices, Rosanna Road, Tipperary E34N566	76	Immigration Service Delivery	Owned by OPW	Shared with An Garda Síochána
Birchgrove House, Roscrea, Co. Tipperary E53 HY05	16	Immigration Service Delivery	Leased by OPW	Shared accommodation
Irish Passenger Information Unit, Skybridge House, Dublin Airport	4	Immigration Service Delivery	Leased by DoJ (temporary accommodation)	Shared accommodation – lease expires 30th November 2021

Gambling Sector

304. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Justice when measures will be introduced to curb online gambling in view of the well-documented problems arising from such gambling; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38884/21]

15 July 2021

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): The Programme for Government contains a commitment to establish a gambling regulator focused on public safety and well-being, covering gambling online and in person, and the powers to regulate advertising, gambling websites and apps.

As outlined in the Justice Plan 2021, I expect to be in a position to publish the Scheme of the Bill in Q3 2021, and will seek Government approval for the drafting of the Bill on that basis.

Work is underway in my Department on the legislation to develop the necessary modern licensing and regulatory provisions for the gambling industry. This involves a major updating of the proposals of the General Scheme of the Gambling Control Bill which was published in 2013.

A considerable amount of further work has been done in the meantime. The Inter-Departmental Working Group on Future Licensing and Regulation of Gambling reported in 2019 and a European Commission funded report on the structure of a gambling regulator was produced in late 2019. The task now is to bring all three elements together, and having regard to the ongoing evolution of the gambling industry, into one coherent scheme of a Bill that will deliver on the Programme for Government commitment.

My objective is to ensure that gambling will be a safe, fair, crime free and entertaining activity for the majority of those who take part in it. The new legislation will ensure that the regulatory authority is given sufficient powers to protect consumers and, in particular, minors and those vulnerable to problem gambling behaviour.

It is envisaged that operators offering activities in whole or in part online, will be subject to the same licensing terms and conditions as any other licensee, with any necessary additions. When established, the regulator will have the necessary enforcement powers for licensing and powers to take action where individuals or operators are failing to follow rules and regulations.

In addition to the publication of the General Scheme, it is intended to finalise the appointment of a CEO Designate by the end of the year, providing a clear path towards the regulator being fully operational in early 2023.

Peace Commissioners

305. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Justice if he will expand the role of peace commissioners to include the signing of forms which would prevent the need for persons to attend a Garda station to have such relevant forms signed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38895/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): As the Deputy may be aware, Peace Commissioners are appointed (and may be removed from that appointment) by the Minister for Justice under Section 88 of the Courts of Justice Act 1924.

The powers and duties of Peace Commissioners consist primarily of:

- Taking statutory declarations
- Witnessing signatures on documents if required by various authorities
- Signing certificates and orders under various Acts
- The Courts of Justice Act 1924 also gives Peace Commissioners the power to issue sum-

mons and warrants but these powers are less frequently used these days.

I wish to advise the Deputy that I have no plans at present to review or expand the current powers and duties of Peace Commissioners.

An Garda Síochána

306. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Justice the number of gardaí stationed in each Garda station in County Wexford by station in each of the years 2011 to date in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38917/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy will appreciate, under the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the general management and administration of Garda business, which includes the deployment of members of An Garda Síochána throughout the State. As Minister, I have no role in this independent function.

As of 31 May 2021 there were 328 Gardaí assigned to the Wexford Division, which represents an increase of 20% since 2011 when there were 273 Garda members assigned to the Division. These Garda members are supported by 44 Garda staff.

Extensive information is available on my Department's website in relation to the numbers of Garda members and their assignment by station nationwide, and may be found at the following link: www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Workforce.

This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána.

Details in relation to the number of Garda civilian staff nationwide are also available on my Department's website at the following link: justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Staff.

An Garda Síochána

307. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Justice the number of motorised vehicles in each Garda station in County Wexford by station and by vehicle type in each of the years from 2011 to date in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38918/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Deputy will be aware that in accordance with the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána. The allocation of Garda resources is a matter for the Commissioner and his management team, in light of identified operational demands. This includes responsibility for the allocation of Garda vehicles. As Minister, I have no role in these matters. I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

I am advised by the Garda authorities that the table below sets out the number of vehicles assigned to the Wexford Division from 2011 up to including 30 June 2021, the latest date for which figures are available. For security reasons An Garda Síochána cannot provide vehicle allocations by Garda Station.

Garda Fleet Wexford	Cars	Vans	Motor-cycles	4 x 4	*Others	Total
30/06/2021	53	8	2	2	0	65
31/12/2020	54	10	2	2	0	68
31/12/2019	48	11	1	2	0	62
31/12/2018	49	12	2	3	0	66
31/12/2017	50	10	1	1	0	62
31/12/2016	48	10	2	1	0	61
31/12/2015	41	8	2	1	0	52
31/12/2014	39	7	1	1	0	48
31/12/2013	29	7	2	2	0	40
31/12/2012	32	4	2	1	0	39
31/12/2011	39	4	4	2	0	49

*The category 'Others' refers to MPV, SUV, Minibus or Prisoner Conveyance Vehicles

An Garda Síochána

308. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Justice the number of Garda bicycles in each Garda station in County Wexford by station in each of the years from 2011 to date in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38922/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Deputy will be aware that in accordance with the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána. The allocation of Garda resources is a matter for the Commissioner and his management team, in light of identified operational demands. This includes responsibility for the allocation of Garda vehicles and bicycles. As Minister, I have no role in these matters. I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

I am advised by the Garda authorities that the table below sets out the number of Garda bicycles in each Garda station in County Wexford, in each of the years from 2011 to date is as follows:

Year	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Wexford	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
New Ross	1	1	1	1	1	1	3	3	3	3	3
Enniscorthy	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Gorey	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Courtown	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

International Protection

309. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice the status of an application by a person (details supplied) for international protection. [38939/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): For reasons of maintaining full confidentiality, it is not my Department's practice to comment on whether

an application for asylum or subsidiary protection has been made in the State. An applicant for such protection status, or their legal representative, should contact either the International Protection Office (IPO) or the International Protection Appeals Tribunal (IPAT) directly, as appropriate.

The IPO may be contacted: by email to info@ipo.gov.ie; by telephone to the IPO Customer Service Centre at 01 6028008 or in writing to Customer Service Centre, International Protection Office, 79-83 Lower Mount Street, Dublin 2.

The IPAT may be contacted either: by email to info@protectionappeals.ie; by telephone at 01-4748400 (or Lo-Call 1890 201 458), or in writing to Corporate Services Division, The International Protection Appeals Tribunal, 6-7 Hanover Street East, Dublin D02 W320.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas mail facility (inisoireachtasmal@justice.ie) which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up-to-date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the parliamentary questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

An Garda Síochána

310. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice if her Department has been appraised of a situation (details supplied) and if she will refer the matter to the Garda Ombudsman. [38940/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management of An Garda Síochána, including all Garda operations. As Minister, I have no role in Garda operational decisions. Similarly, the Courts are independent in the exercise of their functions, subject only to the Constitution and the law.

As the Deputy will also be aware, the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission (GSOC) is the body designated in law to receive and, where it deems appropriate, investigate concerns from members of the public regarding the conduct of members of An Garda Síochána. Any member of the public with a complaint about the conduct of members of An Garda Síochána has the option to contact GSOC about their complaint. The independence of the Ombudsman Commission is key to its role and is enshrined in the law. As Minister for Justice, I have no role nor can I comment on any concerns that are submitted to GSOC.

Insofar as it is suggested that a person may have purported to be a member of An Garda Síochána

who was not a member, it is an offence under section 60 of the Garda Síochána Act 2005 to impersonate a member of An Garda Síochána. Any concerns about such activity should be reported to An Garda Síochána for investigation.

An Garda Síochána

311. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice when she expects the refurbishment improvements works to a Garda station (details supplied) to be completed; when the station will commence operating as a community policing centre; and if she will make a

statement on the matter. [39035/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner is responsible under the law for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, including decisions relating the Garda estate. In addition, the Office of Public Works (OPW) is responsible for the provision and maintenance of Garda accommodation. As Minister, I have no role in these matters.

However to be of assistance to the Deputy, I have requested the information from An Garda Síochána. I am informed by the Garda authorities that the programme of replacement and refurbishment of Garda accommodation is progressed by the Garda authorities working in close cooperation with the OPW.

The refurbishment works at Fitzgibbon Street Garda Station are ongoing, having recommenced in early May 2021 following the reopening of the construction industry and easing of public health restrictions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The OPW has advised that the expected completion date of the construction programme at Fitzgibbon Street is 6 August 2021, following which the building will be handed back to An Garda Síochána for fit out and ICT installation. It is anticipated that the building will be completed for operation as a Garda station during the fourth quarter of 2021.

Crime Prevention

312. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice the steps that are being taken to address the surge in scam calls; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [39036/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I can assure the Deputy that scam calls, which include the criminal activity known as phishing, are taken very seriously by my Department and are the subject of ongoing engagement between An Garda Síochána and the banking and technology industries.

I am advised that work is ongoing in An Garda Síochána to tackle this issue, including, but not limited to, the issuing of advisory notices to members of the public warning against this criminal tactic and advising how to proceed should they be targeted.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that the Garda National Economic Crime Bureau (GNECB) and the Garda National Cyber Crime Bureau (GNCCB) proactively engage with telecommunications providers to suspend Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) numbers which are suspected to be being used to commit fraud.

I am further informed that this engagement does not involve the invoking of any legal power, and it is the experience of GNECB that telecommunication companies based in Ireland will provide assistance in the suspension of such numbers, upon notification that a VOIP number or other number is being used to commit fraud offences.

I understand that the use of ‘spoofed numbers’ involves a process wherein a suspected caller/fraudster uses technology to disguise their number from the recipient of the call, by changing their Caller ID. This is manifested, for example, in cases such as where a suspected fraudster calling from abroad will set the Caller ID to look like an Irish number (landline or mobile) to lull the recipient into a false sense of security.

I am advised that telecommunications companies have informed the GNECB that they have

no control over the use of ‘spoofed numbers’ and it is extremely difficult to identify the source of these calls.

I am assured, however, that both the GNECB and the GNCCB continue to engage with telecommunications service providers regarding phishing scams in this jurisdiction and the identification of criminals involved.

Hospital Facilities

313. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the status of resumption of technology for appointments in each hospital. [31617/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE has been working since 14th May last to recover the effects of the cyber attack on its systems. The attack had the impact of removing access to most patient and care systems as well as the central business systems of the HSE. Over the last weeks many of these systems have been recovered and services have recommenced. There was a priority focus on key systems in the hospital and community areas with a view to resuming vita services. Some of the key areas recovered included, radiotherapy, laboratory, imaging, pharmacy, mental health systems, email and patient administration systems.

At present most systems are operational and services are returning to normal activity and the HSE is updating its systems with data for the period when they were working mostly on paper based processes.

Substance Misuse

314. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if the numbers attending meetings for an addiction service (details supplied) can be increased. [31624/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): The Department has developed guidance for drug and alcohol support groups and treatment programmes. The guidance recognises the important role of drug and alcohol support groups and treatment programmes in helping individuals to build recovery capital and to avoid relapse into harmful patterns of substance use. The latest guidance on the holding of addiction meetings for drug and alcohol support groups was published by the Department on 26 January 2021.

This guidance recommends that for attendance at indoor meetings the maximum number of participants is 15 people (including leaders). It notes that the specific number should be determined by the capacity of the venue to ensure 2 metres social distance and should be adjusted accordingly in smaller venues.

This guidance is subject to ongoing review and updating to reflect public health advice, Government decisions on restrictive measures and emerging issues.

The Government approach throughout 2021 will be guided by the following overarching objectives:

- Reduce case numbers to a very low level and keep them low
- Complete vaccination of all those indicated for and accepting of the vaccine as quickly as possible

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- Continue to protect the most vulnerable to the disease, and priority public services of health and social care, education and childcare.

The Government approach throughout 2021 is guided by the following overarching objectives:

- reduce case numbers to a low level and keep them low
- complete vaccination of the population as soon as possible
- continue to protect the most vulnerable to the disease and priority public services.

As we reopen society, it is important that people stick with the public health guidelines. The Delta continues to pose a threat. Those who are vaccinated should feel comfortable meeting with other fully vaccinated people in all settings. Unfortunately, the Delta variant continues to present a risk to those of us who are unvaccinated or waiting for a second dose of vaccine - we need to continue to follow the public health advice, manage your contacts, avoid crowds, wear a mask, wash your hands and most importantly get your COVID-19 vaccine when it is offered to you.

The scope to increase numbers attending indoor meetings or events is dependent therefore on the rollout of the vaccination programme.

My officials will continue to engage with AA and other recovery groups to explore the scope to increase attendance at indoor meetings, in line with public health advice.

Health Service Executive

315. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health the number of HSE staff that took part in the pilot of the Digital Covid Certificate here; the findings of the pilot scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31640/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Medicinal Products

316. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health when zolgensma will be made available for a child (details supplied) given the fact that the sooner the drug is received the better the outcome in cases in which the drug is administered before the child is two years of age. [31681/21]

331. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health if his Department has examined a review of the gene therapy medicine zolgensma for use in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31932/21]

335. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE will approve and make available in Ireland the drug known as zolgensma; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31963/21]

355. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health the status of the availability of zolgensma (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32183/21]

356. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health when he expects a decision on the approval of a drug (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32184/21]

368. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health the status of the reimbursement process for the drug zolgensma for the treatment of spinal muscular atrophy; the progress made to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32364/21]

370. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health if approval will be given for the use of the drug zolgensma in the case of a child (details supplied). [32382/21]

375. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the status of talks in relation to the drug zolgensma. [32442/21]

414. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Health when a drug will be approved for use; if an emergency use authorisation can be made for a time sensitive case (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32818/21]

428. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health the status of the reimbursement process for zolgensma; the progress made on this issue to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32926/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 316, 331, 335, 355, 356, 368, 370, 375, 414 and 428 together.

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

In line with the 2013 Health Act and the national framework agreed with industry, if a company would like a medicine to be reimbursed by the HSE, the company must submit an application to the HSE to have the new medicine added to the reimbursement list. Reimbursement is for licensed indications which have been granted market authorisation by the European Medicines Agency or the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

In making a relevant reimbursement decision, the HSE is required under the Act to have regard to a number of criteria, including efficacy, the health needs of the public, cost effectiveness and potential or actual budget impact.

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

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

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The HTA was undertaken as a part of the Beneluxa collaboration between Ireland, the Netherlands and Belgium, with Austria acting as a reviewer in the Belgian procedure.

The HTA was completed in May 2021 and pricing/reimbursement negotiations have commenced July 2021.

A final decision on the pricing/reimbursement application for Zolgensma will be made in accordance with the 2013 Health Act.

Questions relating to specific individual patients are an operational issue and are therefore a matter for the HSE. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars me as Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Vaccination Programme

317. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if he has considered engaging with NIAC on giving those who received a first dose of the Covid-19 vaccine (details supplied) an mRNA vaccine as their second dose; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31682/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Ireland's COVID-19 vaccination programme strategy is to distribute all available vaccine as quickly as is operationally possible, prioritising those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19.

The programme is based on the principles of safety, effectiveness and fairness, with the objective of reducing severe illness, hospitalisations and deaths from COVID-19 infection.

The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The Committee's recommendations are based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practices in relation to immunisation. It makes recommendations on vaccination policy to the Department of Health. The NIAC review all data relating to COVID-19 vaccines on a rolling basis.

Following the recommendation for use of vaccines against COVID-19 by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and authorisation for use by the European Commission, the NIAC develops guidance for their use in Ireland which is contained in the Immunisation Guidelines for Ireland. These guidelines are continuously updated and include guidance on all new vaccines as they are approved for use in Ireland.

The current Guidelines state:

There are currently four COVID-19 Vaccines authorised for use in Ireland. The vaccines are not interchangeable. For vaccines that have a two-dose schedule, the same vaccine should be used for both doses. The NIAC will continue to review the evidence concerning the safety and efficacy of a heterologous vaccination strategy (using a different vaccine for the first and

subsequent doses of a multi-dose schedule) as it becomes available.

You can read the guidelines at: www.hse.ie/eng/health/immunisation/hcpinfo/guidelines/covid19.pdf.

Health Services

318. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health if he will review a matter raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) in relation to cervical cancer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31683/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE.

Members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

However, in this case, my officials will follow up directly with the Deputy in relation to this representation.

People can also contact the CervicalCheck programme directly if they have any queries on freephone 1800 45 45 55. The National Screening Service also provide information on their website.

Covid-19 Pandemic

319. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health the position in relation to Government policy on conducting a public inquiry into deaths in nursing homes from the Covid-19 as recommended by the Oireachtas Special Committee on Covid-19 Response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31713/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, is the statutory independent regulator in place for the nursing home sector, whether a HSE managed or a private nursing home. The Authority, established under the Health Act 2007, has significant and wide-ranging powers up to and including withdrawing the registration of a nursing home facility, which means that it can no longer operate as a service provider. This responsibility is underpinned by a comprehensive quality framework comprising of Registration Regulations, Care and Welfare Regulations and National Quality Standards.

HIQA, in discharging its duties determines, through examination of all information available to it, including site inspections, whether a nursing homes meets the regulations in order to achieve and maintain its registration status. Should a nursing home be deemed to be non-compliant with the Regulations and the National Quality Standards, it may either fail to achieve or lose its registration status. In addition, the Chief Inspector has wide discretion in deciding whether to impose conditions of Registration on nursing homes.

The Deputy will be aware that the Nursing Homes Expert was established, on foot of a

NPHET recommendation, to examine the complex issues surrounding the management of COVID-19 among this particularly vulnerable cohort. This Expert Panel report has added further to our knowledge and learning. This report clearly outlines the key protective measures that we must ensure are in place across our nursing homes. These actions are based on learning from our own and the international experience of COVID-19 to date. The report also recommends additional analysis and examination of the relevant public health and other data sets in order that further causal and protective factors for COVID-19 clusters are identified. HIQA and the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) recently jointly published an “Analysis of factors associated with outbreaks of SARS-CoV-2 in nursing homes in Ireland”, delivering on recommendation 6.7 of the Expert Panel report, to further the learning from the pandemic. Further data analysis work and learning will also continue, in line with other recommendations of the Expert Panel, but unfortunately have been impacted by the recent cyberattack on the health system.

Work to progress the recommendations of the Expert Panel report, particularly those recommendations requiring a priority focus in the response to COVID-19, is ongoing across all of the health agencies and stakeholders. Continued learning and understanding of progression of the disease in Ireland is an integral part of those recommendations.

Many of the short- and medium-term recommendations have already been implemented. The significant examination undertaken by the Expert Panel provides important learning and a framework for enhancing older persons services both in the short and long-term and this work is progressing.

A number of supports have been made available to nursing homes throughout the pandemic, including:

- the provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE);
- COVID-19 Response Teams;
- the HSE temporary accommodation scheme;
- serial testing for nursing homes
- HSE training and development resources, which were opened up to private and voluntary providers
- IPC support and advice; and
- the suite of guidance developed to support the sector

At a broader level, there has been significant and ongoing consideration of this impact since the start of the pandemic, with various examinations and development of reports with a focus on COVID-19, its impact on nursing homes and the pandemic learnings that can inform future policy, regulation and the model of care for older persons. There has been a very clear national commitment to continue to learn from the pandemic as the national and international understanding of the virus evolves, and where necessary to ensure that the public health-led approach evolves, as evidence and learning materialises. Findings of these reports confirm that the very infectious nature of COVID-19 makes it difficult to prevent and control in residential care settings. The reports produced nationally identify findings consistent with international evidence, which have highlighted that the probability of COVID-19 introduction into nursing home depends on the levels of the disease circulating in the community, with a higher risk associated with higher incidence rates in the community.

While significant progress has been made in relation to the roll-out of the vaccination programme and the current situation in nursing homes is broadly stable, the prevalence of the more transmissible Delta variant is rapidly increasing in Ireland and this poses a significant risk, in particular to those who are not yet fully protected through vaccination. It must be recognised that the pandemic has not concluded and at this time a priority focus of Government remains on the ongoing management of the COVID-19 response, to ensure that the positive gains now been experienced are preserved, and that those most vulnerable to the virus continue to be safeguarded, having regard to the residual risk.

While we are still dealing with a level of risk in nursing homes, we are continuing to look at options which may be available to the State in relation to listening to the voices of those who have lost a loved one.

Protected Disclosures

320. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health the number of protected disclosures made by staff in the HSE since 2010; the action taken to protect those making such disclosures; the number of protected disclosures that have led to actions or changes in policy as a result; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31714/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): “As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Health Services

321. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health the supports that are available for a family waiting for night nurse services for their newborn child in the case of a family in County Tipperary have been informed they will have to wait at least six months for this service through the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31737/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Vaccination Programme

322. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health if he will allow the administration of a second dose of a vaccine (details supplied) to healthcare workers who have

received a first dose of another vaccine and are concerned about the overall efficacy of the first vaccine against some variants after two doses in certain circumstances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31750/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Ireland's COVID-19 vaccination programme strategy is to distribute all available vaccine as quickly as is operationally possible, prioritising those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19.

The programme is based on the principles of safety, effectiveness and fairness, with the objective of reducing severe illness, hospitalisations and deaths from COVID-19 infection.

The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The Committee's recommendations are based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practice in relation to immunisation. It makes recommendations on vaccination policy to the Department of Health. The NIAC review all data relating to COVID-19 vaccines on a rolling basis.

Following the recommendation for use of vaccines against COVID-19 by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and authorisation for use by the European Commission, the NIAC develops guidance for their use in Ireland which is contained in the Immunisation Guidelines for Ireland. These guidelines are continuously updated and include guidance on all new vaccines as they are approved for use in Ireland.

The current Guidelines state:

There are currently four COVID-19 Vaccines authorised for use in Ireland. The vaccines are not interchangeable. For vaccines that have a two-dose schedule, the same vaccine should be used for both doses. The NIAC will continue to review the evidence concerning the safety and efficacy of a heterologous vaccination strategy (using a different vaccine for the first and subsequent doses of a multi-dose schedule) as it becomes available.

You can read the guidelines at: www.hse.ie/eng/health/immunisation/hcpinfo/guidelines/covid19.pdf.

Vaccination Programme

323. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health the system he has put in place to record side-effects of Covid-19 vaccinations carried out in Ireland; if such data is published or the way it can be accessed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31751/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA) is responsible for monitoring the safety and quality of all medicines including vaccines that are licensed in Ireland. The HPRA and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) continually monitor adverse events to vaccination.

The HPRA operates a national adverse reaction reporting system in which members of the public and healthcare professionals are encouraged to submit any suspected adverse reactions to vaccination. All reports received by the HPRA are routinely transmitted to the EMA's adverse reaction database for inclusion in global signal detection and monitoring activities.

The HPRA follows up on reports of suspected adverse reactions received from healthcare professionals and members of the public through the voluntary reporting system, including any deaths notified following vaccination.

The latest safety update from the HPRA regarding COVID-19 vaccinations is available here: www.hpra.ie/homepage/medicines/safety-notices/item?t=/safety-update-covid-19-vaccines-overview-of-national-reporting-experience-17-june-2021&id=f3c50f26-9782-6eee-9b55-ff00008c97d0.

Vaccination Programme

324. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health when he will review the EMA approval of a vaccine (details supplied) for 12-15 year olds; if medically vulnerable children in this age cohort will be included in cohorts 4 and 7 for the vaccine roll-out; the timeline for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31819/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Ireland welcomes the European Medicines Agency age extension recommendation for the COVID-19 vaccine Comirnaty to include use in children aged 12 to 15. The National Immunisation Advisory Committee is reviewing the matter and will make a recommendation as appropriate. Currently, Ireland's COVID-19 Vaccination Programme is administering vaccines to those aged 16+.

Disability Services

325. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health when respite can be facilitated in the case of a person (details supplied); if all options have been considered in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31858/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Covid-19 Tests

326. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the role he envisages rapid antigen testing playing in respect of Ireland's implementation of the EU Digital Covid Certificate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31859/21]

330. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if Ireland is planning to forgo its portion of the 550 million antigen tests that have been procured by the European Commission in order to facilitate the Digital Covid Certificate and make travel within the EU affordable for all; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31931/21]

385. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health 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. [32561/21]

386. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health if he will make funding available to enable PCR and antigen testing at airports in line with the Digital Covid Certificate; and

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if he will make a statement on the matter. [32562/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 326, 330, 385 and 386 together.

Reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) tests remain the gold standard in terms of COVID-19 testing, particularly in relation to the screening of travellers. Ireland does not accept antigen tests for travel related testing.

COVID-19 tests for the purposes of travel, both to and from the State, can be sourced via private testing providers, in order to preserve the testing capacity of the HSE for priority groups and public health screening.

Under the current travel measures, as provided in S.I. 135/2021, passengers travelling to Ireland are required to present evidence of a negative result from a PCR test. Currently, children aged 6 are not subject to this requirement. The Government has announced revised travel policies to take effect from 19th July in keeping with the EU Digital COVID Certificate. It is intended that from this date, children under 12 years of age will not be subject to the requirement for a pre-departure PCR test.

These travel measures are kept under continuous review based on public health advice and the international epidemiological situation.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

327. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he will engage with a hotel group (details supplied) regarding a mandatory hotel quarantine refund with a view to processing the refund. [31860/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In the interests of protecting confidentiality, the Department of Health does not comment on individual cases, however, I can confirm that officials in my Department have followed up on this request and that appropriate action has been taken in accordance with the refund policy for mandatory hotel quarantine.

Further information on the refund policy can be accessed on www.gov.ie/quarantine.

Covid-19 Pandemic

328. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the requirements for air changes per hour regarding air filtration systems to help create clean air spaces in ensuring workplaces are safe to return to following the publication of the recent return to work safety protocol that was drafted in conjunction with the HSA; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31871/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): It is well recognised that ventilation plays an important factor in reducing the risk of aerosol transmission indoors, where individuals may be in close contact, potentially for longer periods of time and in poorly ventilated areas. It is not however a substitute for other control measures, such as vaccination, physical distancing, cleaning, face coverings and maintaining good hand and respiratory hygiene.

Ventilation requirements will vary depending on the workplace and the type of work being undertaken. The transmission of viral particles very much depends on the interaction of mul-

multiple factors such as the viral emission rate, the duration of exposure, the level of occupancy, environmental conditions, and ventilation rate. Focusing on air changes per hour (ACH) is not practical and would require engineering expertise to take account of specific settings in respect to the nature of the individual premises, the workspace, and the type of work being undertaken. Page 35 of The Work Safely Protocol contains a section on ventilation that offers advice to business owners. The advice is to focus on ways that ventilation can be increased in all work areas and the need to undertake a risk assessment for each indoor workplace to determine if there are any occupied areas that might be enclosed and poorly ventilated.

The Protocol also acknowledges that re-occupying workplaces should not, in most cases, require new ventilation systems but rather that improvements to ventilation will help increase the quantity of clean air and reduce the risk of exposure to airborne concentrations of the virus. The advice is to improve ventilation to increase the fresh air and reduce the level of recirculated air. Increasing ventilation can be achieved through natural means, like opening a window, or by mechanical means.

Building ventilation has remained one element of broader infection prevention and control (IPC) response over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. The appreciation of the role of ventilation has evolved in the context of developing experience, evidence, guidance and training, and the measures implemented reflect this learning.

The Deputy may also wish to note the work of the Expert Group on the Role of Ventilation in Reducing Transmission of COVID-19, which provides scientific advice on the role of ventilation and other control measures in mitigating against the risk of long-range (airborne) transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. Their reports are available on the gov.ie website: www.gov.ie/en/publication/aa43c-expert-group-on-the-role-of-ventilation-in-reducing-transmission-of-covid-19/#reports

It is the responsibility of individual Government departments to provide sector-specific COVID-19 advice on ventilation as per their respective remits. In this regard, the Deputy's attention is drawn to some of the published guidance across a number of sectors, cited below.

Healthcare (HSE-AMRIC guidance):

- "Acute Hospital Infection Prevention and Control Precautions for Possible or Confirmed COVID-19 in a Pandemic Setting V.2.3 09.06.2021" www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/InfectionPreventionandControlPrecautionsforAcuteSettings.pdf.

- "Interim Guidance on Infection Prevention and Control for the Health Service Executive 2021 V1.3. 11.01.2021" www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/hseinfectionpreventionandcontrolguidanceandframework/Interim%20HSE%20Guidance%20on%20IPC.pdf.

- More generally, the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) has published Guidance on Non-Healthcare Building Ventilation during COVID-19. The Guidance provides broad recommendations, based on the literature, for commercial and public buildings: www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/buildingsandfacilitiesguidance/.

Education:

- www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/educationguidance/Guidance%20on%20non%20HCbuilding%20ventilation%20during%20COVID-19.pdf.

- www.gov.ie/en/publication/ad236-guidance-on-ventilation-in-schools/.

Workplaces, Businesses (including hospitality), Retail Settings, and Shopping Centres:

- A revised Work Safely Protocol (previously the Return to Work Protocol) was published on 14th May 2021 as a collaborative effort, led by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, and involving primarily the Health and Safety Authority (HSA), with significant input by public health from the Health Service Executive (HSE). The revised Protocol incorporates the current advice on the Public Health measures needed to reduce the spread of COVID-19 in the community and workplaces including enhanced detail on ventilation: www.gov.ie/en/publication/bb7fd-work-safely-protocol/

- www.nsai.ie/images/uploads/general/NSAI-COVID19-Retail-Guidelines-13012021.pdf

- www.nsai.ie/images/uploads/general/NSAI-COVID19-Shopping-Centre-Guidelines-13012021.pdf

- Fáilte Ireland: Overview Guidelines to Reopening - failtecdn.azureedge.net/failteireland/Overview-Guidelines-to-Re-opening.pdf

- Fáilte Ireland: Guidelines for Reopening Restaurants and Cafes failtecdn.azureedge.net/failteireland/Guidelines-for-Re-opening-Restaurants-and-Cafes.pdf

- Fáilte Ireland: Guidelines for Reopening Hotels and Guesthouses - failtecdn.azureedge.net/failteireland/Guidelines-for-Re-opening-Hotels-and-Guesthouses.pdf.

There is also additional guidance on Gov.ie and on the HSE website which outlines the importance of ventilation in households, this can be found here:

- www.gov.ie/en/publication/472f64-covid-19-coronavirus-guidance-and-advice/.
- www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/how-coronavirus-is-spread.html.

Vaccination Programme

329. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Health the supports that are available to persons who have had an adverse reaction to one of the Covid-19 vaccinations as in the case of a person (details supplied); and if the persons concerned should proceed to take a second dose of the vaccine. [31917/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA) is responsible for monitoring the safety and quality of all medicines including vaccines that are licensed in Ireland. The HPRA and the European Medicines Agency (EMA) continually monitor adverse events to vaccination.

The HPRA operates a national adverse reaction reporting system in which members of the public and healthcare professionals are encouraged to submit any suspected adverse reactions to vaccination. All reports received by the HPRA are routinely transmitted to the EMA’s adverse reaction database for inclusion in global signal detection and monitoring activities.

The HPRA follows up on reports of suspected adverse reactions received from healthcare professionals and members of the public through the voluntary reporting system, including any deaths notified following vaccination.

The latest safety update from the HPRA regarding COVID-19 vaccinations is available

here:

www.hpra.ie/homepage/medicines/covid-19-updates/covid-19-vaccine-communications.

As of 9 June, 9,470 reports of suspected side effects were notified to the HPRA, in the context of 3.1 million doses of Covid-19 vaccine having been administered as of that date. It must be stressed that all vaccines have some side effects, the vast majority of which are mild to moderate in nature.

These side effects need to be balanced against the significant benefits of vaccination in preventing Covid-19 illness. The ongoing reporting conducted by the HPRA continues to provide a favourable assessment of the vaccines and that the benefits outweigh any associated risks.

As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is ongoing, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Question No. 330 answered with Question No. 326.

Question No. 331 answered with Question No. 316.

Vaccination Programme

332. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the policy his Department will adopt for employees who opt out of the Covid-19 vaccination programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31933/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Firstly, as Minister for Health, I would strongly encourage as many people as possible to register on the HSE portal for a vaccination when the facility is available to them, and to avail of their COVID-19 vaccinations when offered.

It will not automatically be known to employers if an employee has availed of or elected against participation in the COVID-19 vaccination programme, however, situations may arise where some employers need to know if an employee has been vaccinated, having regard to a distinct work context. The onus in these instances will be with each individual employer, dependent on their individual needs and requirements, and each employer will deal with these matters on a case-by-case basis accordingly.

The Department of Health will keep its own risk assessment under review on an ongoing basis to decide whether any individual employees of the Department must be vaccinated to take out their normal work tasks and if so, what other protective measures may be needed in any individual case.

The current public health advice is that all existing infection prevention and control measures, (such as physical distancing, hand hygiene, face coverings, adequate ventilation), and working from home unless an employee's physical presence in the workplace is necessary, must also remain in place for individuals even following their vaccination. The Department's employees continue to work from home unless their attendance on-site is necessary. In line

with other civil service employers, this will be kept under review depending on the prevailing public health advice.

Nursing Homes

333. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the current rules in respect of permitting residents of nursing homes to go out into the community for recreational and hospitality visits; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [31956/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) has recently published updated guidance on visiting in long-term residential care: COVID-19: Normalising Visiting in Long Term Residential Care Facilities (LTRCFs). This guidance will come into effect on 19 July.

The public health advice is to restore visiting to near normal in terms of frequency of visits in those settings with a high level of vaccination of residents as quickly as possible, while also recognising the need to remain cautious as we continue to deal with the evolving risks associated with COVID-19. The guidance will be kept under continuing review as new evidence and data emerges.

The new guidance provides that:

Providers should put in place the necessary measures to progress to more normalised visiting and visiting frequency as quickly as possible in line with public health guidance with no more than two visitors at any one time.

- Routine visiting will no longer need to be scheduled in advance.
- There is no requirement to have a list of nominated visitors.
- The duration of the visit should not be limited.
- Fewer restrictions will apply to residents going on outings or visits outside of the nursing home.

Resident outings and visits to homes of families and friends are important for resident’s overall welfare. As noted in the guidance, outings and activities should comply with the public health measures in effect at the time in relation to groups of people meeting.

Where there is a high level of significant vaccine protection in an LTRCF there is no requirement on residents to limit their movement within the LTRCF when they return from an outing or hospital attendance, regardless of the duration of the absence, unless some significant and unanticipated exposure risk happened or there is a specific public health or infection prevention and control recommendation that requires limitation of movement. Where there is not a high level of vaccination in an LTRCF, residents may be required to restrict their movements on return to the LTRCF.

Full details are available on the HPSC website and at www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/residentialcarefacilities/Normalising%20visiting%20in%20LTRCF.pdf.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

334. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if the pandemic unemployment payment is being used as reckonable income for medical card and general practitioner visit card applications. [31957/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE PCRS assesses the Pandemic Unemployment Payment as equivalent to employment income when conducting its financial assessment for a medical card or GP Visit card. This is because the rate of payment is aligned with previous earnings from employment and it also ensures alignment with the approach taken by the Department of Social Protection in relation to this payment.

Question No. 335 answered with Question No. 316.

Health Services Staff

336. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of graduates hired in the areas of occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech and language, dietetics and audiology in each CHO area, by each sub area of each CHO area in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [31991/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Hospital Appointments Status

337. **Deputy Sean Fleming** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will receive an appointment for a hip operation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32006/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Covid-19 Pandemic

338. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the issues as outlined in correspondence (details supplied) in relation to the movement of ferries on the island of Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32007/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Regulation referred to in the cor-

response submitted by the Deputy applies to people travelling to an airport or port for the purposes of going overseas without reasonable excuse; however, the provision concerned is subject to the review of current Government advice to avoid non-essential travel, which is intended to be changed from 19 July. The necessary amendments to regulations will be made in order to give effect to the policy changes and the issue raised will be addressed in that context.

Hospital Services

339. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to enhance supports for breastfeeding mothers in Irish maternity units and at home to ensure that mothers who choose to breastfeed are supported in that choice; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32008/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

I can confirm however that in May of this year I announced significant investment towards implementing the HSE Breast-feeding Action Plan, with €1.58 million of funding to provide an additional 23.5 lactation consultants across hospital and community settings.

Vaccination Programme

340. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health if he will request the National Immunisation Advisory Committee to examine the possibility of giving a vaccine (details supplied) as the second dose for those who have already received a vaccine for a first dose; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32034/21]

388. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health if a person who has received their first vaccine (details supplied) dose and is due to receive their second dose must receive the vaccine as their second dose or can choose which vaccine they can avail of; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32564/21]

390. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health if an alternative vaccine can be offered to persons who received their first dose of a vaccine (details supplied) but want to be given an alternative vaccine for their second dose; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32574/21]

391. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that a number of studies have shown that mixing vaccines, particularly mixing a mRNA vaccine after an initial dose of a vaccine (details supplied) may provide more efficacious outcomes against the variants than administering the same vaccine twice; if his attention has been further drawn to the fact that a number of countries including Canada, Sweden and Norway are adopting this approach; if he will permit individuals to choose which vaccine to take for their booster dose and in particular for the 60-69 age cohort who were required to take a particular vaccine for their initial dose; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32575/21]

413. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he has requested the HSE and its advisory bodies to consider the mixing and matching of Covid-19 vaccines already being administered in this country in relation to the second vaccination as is happening in other countries in Europe and elsewhere; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32817/21]

415. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health his views on comments (details supplied) in relation to the possible mix and match of vaccines in order to protect the most vulnerable quicker than previously planned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32819/21]

421. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if he plans to amend the vaccine protocol for the 60-70 age cohort in the context of offering persons in this age profile the option of receiving an alternative to a vaccine (details supplied). [32881/21]

441. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health if a person will be prioritised for another vaccination if they refuse a vaccine (details supplied) as a second dose; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33053/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 340, 388, 390, 391, 413, 415, 421 and 441 together.

Ireland's COVID-19 vaccination programme strategy is to distribute all available vaccine as quickly as is operationally possible, prioritising those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19.

The programme is based on the principles of safety, effectiveness and fairness, with the objective of reducing severe illness, hospitalisation and deaths from COVID-19 infection.

The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The Committee's recommendations are based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practice in relation to immunisation. It makes recommendations on vaccination policy to the Department of Health. The NIAC review all data relating to COVID-19 vaccines on a rolling basis.

Following the recommendation for use of vaccines against COVID-19 by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and authorisation for use by the European Commission, the NIAC develops guidance for their use in Ireland which is contained in the Immunisation Guidelines for Ireland. These guidelines are continuously updated and include guidance on all new vaccines as they are approved for use in Ireland.

The current Guidelines state:

There are currently four COVID-19 Vaccines authorised for use in Ireland. The vaccines are not interchangeable. For vaccines that have a two-dose schedule, the same vaccine should be used for both doses. The NIAC will continue to review the evidence concerning the safety and efficacy of a heterologous vaccination strategy (using a different vaccine for the first and subsequent doses of a multi-dose schedule) as it becomes available.

You can read the guidelines at: www.hse.ie/eng/health/immunisation/hcpinfo/guidelines/covid19.pdf.

Disability Services

341. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health if he will approve the request for a rehabilitation bed for a person (details supplied). [32038/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Disability Services

342. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health the number on a waiting list for the National Rehabilitation Centre in three month increments up to and including 24 months by county of residence in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32039/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): The Programme for Government – Our Shared Future’ includes a commitment for advancing neuro-rehabilitation services in the community. The Health Service Executive is leading on the implementation framework in respect of the recommendations of the National Policy and Strategy for the provision of Neuro-Rehabilitation Services in Ireland 2011-2015.

As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Vaccination Programme

343. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if students who are going on Erasmus or study abroad programmes for the upcoming academic year will be provided with a Covid-19 vaccine ahead of the 2021-2022 academic year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32047/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

On the 30th of March, the Government approved a further update to the COVID-19 Vaccination Allocation Strategy. Based on clinical, scientific and ethical frameworks produced by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee and my Department, following the vaccination of those most at risk, future groups will be vaccinated by age, in cohorts of 10 years (i.e., 64-55; 54-45, etc.).

Further details are available here: www.gov.ie/en/press-release/93f8f-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-irelands-vaccination-prioritisation-list

I am pleased to inform you that the vaccine rollout at participating pharmacies has now expanded to encompass an opt-in model for the vaccination of younger age groups. The amendment to the programme follows updated advice from the NIAC regarding the use of adenoviral vaccines (AstraZeneca and Janssen) in those aged under 50 years of age.

Younger age groups who do not wish to receive an adenoviral vaccine will be offered an mRNA vaccination in due course. The HSE will put in place consent mechanisms to ensure that anyone under 35 years of age who chooses to avail of an earlier vaccination is adequately informed of the extremely rare side-effects associated with the adenoviral vector vaccines. People in this age group will also be advised about the probable timing of the availability of mRNA vaccine for their age group when considering this accelerated option.

The administration of the single-dose Janssen vaccine to those aged 18-34 began the week commencing 5 July at participating pharmacies across the country. The rollout is being implemented by the HSE in conjunction with the Irish Pharmacy Union and will see approximately 850 pharmacies participating nationwide.

Covid-19 Pandemic

344. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health if he has considered procuring more sustainable personal protective equipment for use in community-based care circumstances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32057/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Vaccination Programme

345. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if steps are being taken to address glitches in the Covid-19 vaccination appointments system given that some persons in the older age cohorts have been overlooked for their appointments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32071/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

State Bodies

346. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health his views on the appropriateness of an appointment to the board of Safefood Ireland (details supplied); his views on whether this represents a conflict of interest in the context of Safefood Ireland progressing Ireland's breastfeeding strategy in addition to the WHO's recommendations on breastfeeding; if he will review this decision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32072/21]

357. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if he will address concerns raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32185/21]

358. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the reason for the appointment of a person (details supplied) to an advisory role with Safe Food Ireland; his views on whether the appointment demonstrates a conflict of interest and is contradictory to the national policy of trying to promote and improve the uptake of breastfeeding; the basis for their appointment; his further views on the influence that such a person can have on the board in terms of promoting the use of infant formula above breastfeeding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32186/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 346, 357 and 358 together.

The British-Irish Agreement Act, 1999 provides for the Food Safety Promotion Board/Safefood to have both an Advisory Board and an Advisory Committee.

Safefood Advisory Committee (SAC) members are selected by Safefood following a publicly advertised invitation for expressions of interest from suitably qualified professionals working in fields relevant to the organisation's aims. The SAC is drawn from a wide range of disciplines, including the food industry.

The role of the SAC is advisory. It meets on average twice a year and provides expert advice to Safefood when it considers new and emerging issues in the wider food environment. Members advise Safefood on food safety and healthy eating related issues within their own areas of professional expertise. They also advise on strategic and cost-effective communications mechanisms for fostering positive food safety across the food chain and healthy eating behaviours. The SAC provides Safefood's in-house experts with different perspectives.

Appointees to the SAC must comply with the Code of Conduct for SAC members and disclose any information or personal connections which, if appointed, could lead to a real or perceived conflict of interest. Members of the SAC must comply with Safefood's corporate governance requirements dealing with the potential for a conflict of interest. Should conflicts of interest arise, the relevant member is required to highlight the potential conflict and must, in line with procedure, step back from any discussions on those issues as appropriate.

Safefood developed a code of practice for Advisory Board members and SAC members and procedures for conflict of interest is included.

SAC members act in a voluntary capacity and are there to bring their expertise to topics for discussion – they are not present to represent the views of their employer. Safefood advises that all SACs appointed to date have included food industry representatives.

The Department of Health and the HSE are responsible for breast-feeding policy in Ireland. Safefood is not responsible for breast-feeding policy. The HSE Breast-feeding in a Healthy Ireland Action Plan is the framework for progressing supports for breast-feeding in Ireland. Since its publication, the HSE has established the National Breast-feeding Implementation Group to progress relevant actions. A new Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes in public health

services is in final draft and is due for implementation across all health services in 2021. In 2021, my Department made a significant investment towards implementing the Breast-feeding Action Plan. I recently announced additional funding to the HSE of €1.58 million to fund 24 additional lactation consultants, thereby providing support to every maternity unit in the country.

Hospital Appointments Status

347. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding an appointment for a person (details supplied) in Dublin 11; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32073/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I refer to the matter which has been raised by the Deputy. The Treatment Abroad Scheme (TAS) is not available to a patient where a procedure is available in the State's public healthcare system. However, the Cross-Border Directive (CBD) and the analogous Northern Ireland Planned Healthcare Scheme (NIPHS) allows for patients that are normally resident in Ireland and availing of public health services to avail of treatment in another EU/EEA Member State, for the CBD, or Northern Ireland, for the NIPHS. Reimbursement under either scheme will be made at the lesser of either the cost of the treatment in Ireland, or the cost in the other State - details are available from the HSE's CBD National Contact Point (NCP).

The patient should contact the HSE's CBD NCP regarding details of either the CBD or NIPH schemes. The contact details are: National Contact Point, Cross-Border Healthcare Directive Department, HSE Cross Border Directive, St Canice's Hospital, Dublin Road, Kilkenny Tel: 056 778 4546 Email: crossborderdirective@hse.ie.

Medicinal Products

348. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if a response will issue to concerns raised by a person (details supplied) in respect of additional charges to the drugs payment scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32127/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013 permits community pharmacists to dispense generic medicines where a brand name medicine has been prescribed, provided they have been designated as interchangeable by the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

Reference pricing means a single reimbursement price, or reference price, for a group of interchangeable medicines. This is the maximum price that the HSE will pay community pharmacies for all medicines in this group, regardless of the individual medicines' price.

Generic medicines must meet exactly the same standards of quality and safety and have the same effect as the original medicine. All of the generic medicines on the Irish market are required to be properly licensed and meet the requirements of the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

To improve the patient safety aspect for generic substitution, Section 13 (1) of the Act allows a prescriber to indicate on a prescription that a branded medicine should, for clinical reasons, not be substituted.

If a patient wishes to remain on a particular branded medicine, they should discuss this with their clinician in the first instance who may, for clinical reasons, write 'do not substitute' on the

prescription. If the clinician decides to write ‘do not substitute’, then the patient will not have to pay the difference between the reference price and the branded product price.

Home Help Service

349. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health if it will be ensured that a person (details supplied) is provided with the awarded amount of home help hours; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32128/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Disability Services

350. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the number of new early intervention teams that have been established since July 2020 in view of the Programme for Government commitment to fully implement the access and inclusion model; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32129/21]

351. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the annual cost of running a full staff early intervention team, including an occupational therapist, psychologist and speech and language therapist; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32130/21]

352. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the number of school age teams that are currently operating across the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32131/21]

353. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the annual cost of running a full staff school age team, including an occupational therapist, psychologist and speech and language therapist; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32132/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I propose to take Questions Nos. 350 to 353, inclusive, together.

As these Parliamentary Questions relate to operational issues, they are a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Question No. 351 answered with Question No. 350.

Question No. 352 answered with Question No. 350.

Question No. 353 answered with Question No. 350.

Covid-19 Pandemic

354. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health if a person (details supplied) would need to enter mandatory hotel quarantine on return to Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32136/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health (Amendment) Act 2021 provides for mandatory quarantine in designated facilities for persons coming into the State from areas where there is known to be sustained human transmission of COVID-19 or Variants of Concern, or from which there is a high risk of importation of COVID-19 or any variant of concern by travel from that area, and for the designation of such areas by the Minister.

Peru is currently on the list of Designated States.

There are some limited exemptions from the requirement to complete mandatory hotel quarantine and these are provided for under the Act, i.e. persons arriving into the State:

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

2 drivers of a heavy goods vehicle in the course of duty

3 airline pilots, aircrew, maritime master or maritime crew in the course of duty

4 pursuant to an arrest warrant, extradition proceedings or other mandatory legal obligation

5 who are a member of An Garda Síochána or Defence Forces (or their equivalents from another state) and travelling in the course of duty

6 who is a diplomat or certain other category of persons entitled to privileges and immunities in the State

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

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

The Act also empowers the Minister to prescribe other classes of person who should be exempted:

1 SI 134 of 2021 regarding passengers transiting through an Irish port or airport.

2 SI 181 of 2021 regarding athletes competing in events of international standing.

3 SI 183 and SI 211 2021 regarding new-born infants born abroad returning to the State together with their families

4 SI 183 of 2021 regarding travellers who have received the full course of a relevant EMA approved Covid-19 vaccine.

5 SI 216 of 2021 regarding travellers returning to the State after receiving unavoidable, imperative and time-sensitive medical treatment, together with carers or dependants travelling

with them.

6 SI 241 of 2021 regarding travellers providing essential services in the State.

Exemptions are granted by the Border Management Unit (BMU) on arrival at immigration. Passengers need to be able to provide documentation supporting their case for exemption to the immigration officers at the port of entry. If an exemption is not granted, the passenger will be taken to Mandatory Hotel Quarantine.

Question No. 355 answered with Question No. 316.

Question No. 356 answered with Question No. 316.

Question No. 357 answered with Question No. 346.

Question No. 358 answered with Question No. 346.

Health Services

359. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter regarding a counselling service for stroke victims (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32187/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Vaccination Programme

360. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the amount paid to social media influencers to promote the Covid-19 vaccination programme; the list of influencers who have been used in a public relations campaign relating to Covid-19; the campaign details for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32188/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I can confirm that my Department has not paid any social media influencers to promote the COVID-19 vaccination programme.

My Department has however come together with a network of expert Young Science Communicators from across Ireland to create the SciComm Collective. It works to inspire and empower young people to live safely within the Covid-19 public health guidelines, to encourage uptake of COVID-19 vaccines and address any misinformation circulating about Covid virus or vaccines.

The group regularly create content, upload, and post information through their social media channels and @scicommcollective_ire, sharing their experiences and expertise, as well as practical advice on living safely within the COVID-19 public health guidelines.

The SciComm Collective has been live since April 2021.

Health Services

361. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health the status of the HSE breastfeeding action plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32189/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

I can confirm however that in May of this year I announced significant investment towards implementing the HSE Breastfeeding Action Plan, with €1.58 million of funding to provide an additional 23.5 lactation consultants across hospital and community settings.

Health Services

362. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if staffing levels of lactation consultants will be increased in line with international staffing benchmark and be fully accessible in all maternity units; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32190/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): As part of Sláintecare’s Healthy Living pillar, “A Healthy Weight for Ireland: Obesity Policy and Action Plan 2016-2025”, Healthy Ireland has committed to implement the Ten Steps Forward. These Steps engage and co-ordinate multi-sectoral action to help reduce obesity and commit to investment in additional resources in acute and primary care settings together with enhanced training, provision of supports to mothers and social marketing.

This year, Healthy Ireland is making a significant investment towards giving children the best start in life through facilitating the implementation of the National Breastfeeding Action Plan. Ireland has a culture of bottle feeding and, in order to improve child and maternal health, as well as reductions in childhood obesity and chronic diseases, we need to improve our breastfeeding rates. In May, I announced funding of €1.54m which will provide the additional 23.5 lactation consultants across hospital and community settings, that are required to ensure timely skilled assistance for mothers who wish to breastfeed and support enhanced training, skills and knowledge to frontline staff.

Health Services

363. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if funding will be provided to remove any barriers to recruitment of new international board certified lactation consultant hospital posts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32191/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working

hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Healthy Ireland has made a significant investment towards giving children the best start in life through facilitating the implementation of the National Breastfeeding Action Plan. In order to improve child and maternal health, as well as reductions in childhood obesity and chronic diseases, we need to improve our breastfeeding rates. For this reason I announced in May funding of €1.54m which will provide the additional 23.5 lactation consultants across hospital and community settings, that are required to ensure timely skilled assistance for mothers who wish to breastfeed and support enhanced training, skills and knowledge to frontline staff.

National Treatment Purchase Fund

364. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if a person (details supplied) will have their procedure covered under the National Treatment Purchase Fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32282/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) works with public hospitals, as opposed to with patients directly, to offer and provide the funding for treatment to clinically suitable long waiting patients who are on an inpatient/day case waiting list for surgery, having been referred on to such a list following clinical assessment by a consultant/specialist at an outpatient clinic.

The key criteria of the NTPF is the prioritisation of the longest waiting patients first. While the NTPF identifies patients eligible for NTPF treatment, it is solely on the basis of their time spent on the Inpatient/Daycare Waiting List. The clinical suitability of the patient to avail of NTPF funded treatment is determined by the public hospital.

As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Care of the Elderly

365. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health when day care centres will reopen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32290/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Day centres are fundamental to the health and well-being of our older population and play a key role in enabling older people to live independently in their own communities. The pandemic and associated restrictions has had a profound impact across society and especially for our older population.

All Community Health Organisations through the National Older Persons Office were requested in April 2021 to provide information on the status of their Day Care Services in order to ascertain the level of service that could resume on receipt of updated public health guidance. As a result, it was intended that approximately 100 day centres would re-open week beginning

5 July. It was also intended that an additional 55 centres would resume later in July and August, with a further 90 centres that require works expected to reopen before the end of the year. It was indicated that these dates may be subject to change as the HSE continues to deal with the significant challenge of the on-going cyber attack.

Since then updated Public Health guidance to support the re-opening of Day Care Services for Older People was provided in June 2021 to facilitate re-opening plans. Following on from this a further information request issued to HSE Services to obtain an update on re-opening plans. The process for reopening of the centres has already commenced and it is expected that more centres will reopen in the coming weeks.

Hospital Services

366. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health the status of public health lists (details supplied). [32362/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health Act 1970 (as amended) provides that all persons ordinarily resident in the country are eligible, subject to certain charges, to public in-patient hospital services including consultant services. All persons, accessing public in-patient (including day case) services in a public hospital are liable for the statutory in-patient daily charge of €80 per day up to a maximum of €800 in any period of 12 consecutive months. In addition the Health (Out-Patient Charges) Regulations 2019 provide for the €100 statutory charge for an Emergency Department attendance and the €75 minor injury unit / urgent care centre attendance charge.

There are cohorts of people who are exempt from these charges, including, but not limited to persons with full eligibility, women receiving services in respect of motherhood, children up to the age of six weeks, children suffering from diseases prescribed under section 52 (2) of the Act, and persons receiving services for the diagnosis or treatment of infectious diseases. Persons with private health insurance may wish to use their private health insurance to cover the statutory charges arising from a public hospital service.

Section 55 of the Health Act 1970 (as amended) also provides that the HSE may make available private in-patient services to persons who are not entitled to, or who do not have or have waived their eligibility to public in-patient services. In these circumstances the statutory hospital charges under Section 55 that apply for such an episode of care is set out in the table below and depends on the category of hospital, duration of stay and whether the accommodation was provided in a single or multi-occupancy room. It is also noted that patients opting to be treated privately must also pay the consultant fees associated with their treatment. Patients may seek to use their private health insurance to pay for these costs.

Hospital Category	Daily charge for in-patient services where overnight accommodation provided in a single occupancy room	Daily charge for in-patient services where overnight accommodation provided in a multiple occupancy room	Daily charge for day case in-patient services where overnight accommodation not provided
Hospitals specified in Fifth Schedule	€1,000	€813	€407
Hospitals specified in Sixth Schedule	€800	€659	€329

Covid-19 Pandemic

367. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if he can remove the visitation rules for the partner and or other nominated birth companion after the baby is born so that those who have given birth can be supported; if attendance for partners and or other nominated birth companions through all stages of labour including induction can be ensured; and if it can be ensured that partners and or other nominated birth companions can be present at all antenatal appointments given that all antenatal appointments have the potential to contain news of emotional significance as per the HSPC guidelines. [32363/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Question No. 368 answered with Question No. 316.

Nursing Homes

369. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health if he will extend the temporary assistance payment scheme for nursing homes Covid-19 after 30 June 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32365/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The Temporary Assistance Payment Scheme (TAPS) was established in April 2020 as a temporary administrative measure in response to the challenges faced by the nursing home sector at the start of the pandemic. As the pandemic continued, additional support measures for private and voluntary nursing homes have been delivered through the Health Service Executive (HSE).

As of 14th July 2021, 7,683 claims had been submitted as part of the Scheme. In total, €134.5 million has been made available under TAPS between 2020 and 2021.

Due to the ongoing high level of risk associated with COVID-19 during this period, the Department of Health responded by extending the scheme twice, far beyond the originally planned timescale of three months. The further extension of the scheme was outlined in the Government's Plan 'Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19', published in September 2020. This provided reassurance of the Scheme's availability and a planned timeframe of operation to the end of June 2021.

The cessation of TAPS at the end of June, as planned and previously announced, was communicated with all relevant stakeholders, including Nursing Homes Ireland – the national representative body for the private and voluntary nursing home sector.

There has been a marked improvement in the status of the virus in the community and in nursing homes due to the rollout of the National Vaccination Programme – COVID-19 cases and outbreaks in nursing homes are now at a very low level compared with the first quarter of the year and, overall, the epidemiological situation is very positive. It is the Department's understanding that currently there is one open outbreak in a nursing home.

(Please note that the cyber-attack on the HSE on 14 May 2021 has prevented the routine notification of cases, associated deaths and outbreaks of COVID-19 to the Computerised Infectious Disease Reporting (CIDR) system. As an interim measure, provisional epidemiological reports are being prepared but have not undergone the data validation procedures undertaken through CIDR. For this reason, data continues to be provisional at this time.)

The Scheme has fulfilled its temporary purpose of providing financial support to nursing homes to address COVID-19. Although the risk is greatly reduced, it has not been completely eliminated, therefore the outbreak assistance element of the Scheme will continue to be available to nursing homes until the end of 2021. Availability of outbreak assistance is subject to the overall sanctioned amount of €42m for 2021.

The substantial package of non-financial supports outlined below will continue to be provided for the time being:

- Provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). The continued supply of PPE is a key support mechanism and will be provided in line with clinical and public health recommendations;

- The COVID-19 Response Teams established to support Public Health Outbreak teams covering all residential services as well as home support settings. All stakeholders, including the COVID-19 Nursing Homes Expert Panel, have highlighted the significant contribution these new teams have made to supporting nursing homes throughout the pandemic;

- The HSE Temporary Accommodation Scheme;

- HSE training and development resources, including the opening up of HSeLanD to private and voluntary providers.

- IPC support and advice;

- The substantial suite of publicly available guidance developed to support the sector.

These measures and supports reflect a significant investment by the State to support nursing homes and other services and measures, such as the COVID-19 Response Teams, and are a clear signal of the work that is ongoing to integrate the wider health system.

It is also important to reflect that all nursing homes, as registered providers with HIQA, have well established obligations under the legal framework in terms of the delivery of safe care to residents. Nursing homes are required, by law, to ensure that procedures, consistent with the standards for the prevention and control of healthcare associated infections published by HIQA, are implemented by staff. The current infection prevention and control standards have been in operation since 2018. Good and effective IPC procedures should be in place across the entire health and social care service as a matter of course.

In February 2021, a revised plan 'Resilience and Recovery 2021 Plan: The Path Ahead' was published by the Government. This plan recognises the need for longer-term reform of both older persons and nursing home care, broadly reflecting the lessons learned from the COVID-19 Nursing Homes Expert Panel and the pandemic. However, these structural reforms, including the policy and regulatory framework, extend beyond the scope of a temporary financial support scheme aimed at a specific, time-limited public health objective.

Question No. 370 answered with Question No. 316.

Medicinal Products

371. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Health if medical cannabis can now be prescribed to cancer patients undergoing chemotherapy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32389/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): There are two separate pathways for accessing cannabis for medical use in Ireland.

Medical Cannabis Access Programme (MCAP)

The provision of the Medical Cannabis Access Programme (MCAP) as a result of recommendations by the Health Products Regulatory Authority in their “Cannabis for Medical User – A Scientific Review”.

The review stated that if the policy decision is to make cannabis available for medical purposes, the HPRA advised that it should recognise patient need, but be evidence based. It was advised, that treatment with cannabis be only permitted under a controlled access programme for the treatment of patients with the following medical conditions which have failed to respond to standard treatments;

- spasticity associated with multiple sclerosis;
- intractable nausea and vomiting associated with chemotherapy;
- severe, refractory (treatment-resistant) epilepsy.

Subsequently the Minister for Health established an Expert Reference Group to advise on the development of a Medical Cannabis Access Programme. This Group developed detailed Clinical Guidelines for the MCAP to be followed by clinicians, which contained inter alia guidance on ingredient combinations that are recommended for each of the three indications included in the MCAP

The Medicinal Cannabis Access programme (MCAP) is a 5-year pilot programme. The purpose of the programme is to facilitate access to acceptable cannabis-based products for medical use that are of a standardised quality and which meet the requirements outlined in the Misuse of Drugs (Prescription and Control of Supply of Cannabis for Medical Use) Regulations 2019 (as amended).

There are currently 4 products assessed by the HPRA for inclusion in Schedule 1 of the Regulations, more products are currently being assessed by the HPRA.

Reimbursement of the products, prescribed by approved medical consultants and supplied through community pharmacies for a specified therapeutic indication in line with Schedule 2 of the Misuse of Drugs (Prescription and Control of Supply of Cannabis for Medical Use) Regulations 2019 (as amended) will be on an individual named patient basis aligned to the patient’s eligibility under the community drug schemes (Medical Card, Long Term Illness Scheme and Drugs Payment Scheme). It cannot be assumed that reimbursement approval will be forthcoming on submission of applications. A reimbursement decision will be communicated with the prescribing consultant in writing.

The HSE have indicated that the MCAP will be operational this month.

Ministerial Licence under Section 14 of the Misuse of Drugs Acts 1977-2016

Pending full operation of the MCAP and for medical indications not included in the MCAP,

doctors may continue to utilise the Ministerial licensing route to prescribe medical cannabis for their patients, should they wish to do so.

In line with the Chief Medical Officer's advice, the granting of a licence for cannabis for medical purposes must be premised on an appropriate application being submitted to the Department of Health, which is endorsed by a consultant who is responsible for the management of the patient and who is prepared to monitor the effects of the treatment over time.

It is important to note that the medical decision to prescribe or not prescribe any treatment, including cannabis treatment, for an individual patient is strictly a decision for the treating clinician, in consultation with their patient. The Minister for Health has no role in this clinical decision-making process.

Vaccination Programme

372. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide clarification on a vaccine-related matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32394/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

On the 23rd of February, I announced an update to Ireland's COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy. In comprising the initial Vaccine Allocation Strategy, the NIAC listed several conditions associated with increased risk of severe disease and death. In the intervening period, national and international evidence has become available which has enabled a more detailed analysis of underlying conditions that may increase the risk of developing severe disease or death. The NIAC has now been able to more comprehensively identify those medical conditions and to distinguish between those which place a person at very high or high risk of severe disease if they contract the virus. Medical conditions and the magnitude of the risk they pose will continue to be monitored and periodically reviewed.

On the 30th of March, the Government approved a further update to the COVID-19 Vaccination Allocation Strategy. Based on clinical, scientific and ethical frameworks produced by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee and my department, following the vaccination of those most at risk, future groups will be vaccinated by age, in cohorts of 10 years (i.e., 64-55; 54-45, etc.).

The move to an age-based model better supports the programme objectives by:

- protecting those at highest risk of severe disease first, which benefits everyone most;
- facilitating planning and execution of the programme across the entire country;
- improving transparency and fairness.

Currently, Ireland's COVID-19 Vaccination Programme is administering vaccines to those aged 16+.

Ireland welcomes the EMA age extension recommendation for the COVID-19 vaccine Comirnaty (Pfizer BioNTech) to include use in children aged 12 to 15. Ireland's National Im-

munisation Advisory Committee are reviewing the matter and will make a recommendation as appropriate.

Food Waste

373. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the amount of food that is wasted or thrown out in public and voluntary hospitals in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; if the food is given away or donated in order to avoid waste; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32395/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to services on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Hospital Waiting Lists

374. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to long waiting times in the emergency unit at the Rotunda Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32441/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Question No. 375 answered with Question No. 316.

Vaccination Programme

376. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if consideration has been given to vaccinating teachers who will be undertaking the July provision in summer 2021. [32443/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

On the 23rd of February, I announced an update to Ireland's COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy. In comprising the initial Vaccine Allocation Strategy, the NIAC listed several conditions associated with increased risk of severe disease and death. In the intervening period,

national and international evidence has become available which has enabled a more detailed analysis of underlying conditions that may increase the risk of developing severe disease or death.

The NIAC has now been able to more comprehensively identify those medical conditions and to distinguish between those which place a person at very high or high risk of severe disease if they contract the virus. Medical conditions and the magnitude of the risk they pose will continue to be monitored and periodically reviewed.

On the 30th of March, the Government approved a further update to the COVID-19 Vaccination Allocation Strategy. Based on clinical, scientific and ethical frameworks produced by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee and my Department, following the vaccination of those most at risk, future groups will be vaccinated by age, in cohorts of 10 years (i.e., 64-55; 54-45, etc.).

The move to an age-based model better supports the programme objectives by:

- protecting those at highest risk of severe disease first, which benefits everyone most;
- facilitating planning and execution of the programme across the entire country;
- improving transparency and fairness.

Further details are available here: www.gov.ie/en/press-release/93f8f-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-irelands-vaccination-prioritisation-list/

Care of the Elderly

377. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide the necessary capital and revenue resources for day care dementia services to reopen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32518/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): All Community Health Organisations through the National Older Persons Office were requested in April 2021 to provide information on the status of their Day Care Services in order to ascertain the level of service that could resume on receipt of updated public health guidance. As a result, it was intended that approximately 100 day centres would re-open week beginning 5 July. It was also intended that an additional 55 centres would resume later in July and August and that a further 90 centres that require minor adaptation works are expected to reopen in the next few months. Funding will be made available to assist these centres that require such works.

It was indicated that these dates may be subject to change as the HSE continues to deal with the significant challenge of the on-going cyber-attack. Since then updated Public Health guidance to support the re-opening of Day Care Services for Older People was provided in June 2021 to facilitate re-opening plans. Following on from this a further information request issued to HSE Services to obtain an update on re-opening plans. The process for re-opening of the centres has already commenced and it is expected that more centres will re-open in the coming weeks.

I am pleased to advise the Deputy that the Alzheimer Society of Ireland has confirmed the re-opening of three centres, Bessboro, The Orchard and Dundalk. I understand that three further centres at Watermans, Sligo and Waterford are due to re-open the week beginning the 19th of July with further plans for phased re-opening throughout August and September.

Primary Medical Certificates

378. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 671 of 11 May 2021, when a person (details supplied) will receive a decision on their primary medical certificate application. [32519/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As I indicated in my previous reply, I referred Parliamentary Question No. 671 of 11 May, 2021 to the Health Service Executive, for direct reply to the Deputy.

As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the Health Service Executive (HSE). However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and to resume normal services.

Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Vaccination Programme

379. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health when persons aged between 60-69 can expect to receive their second dose of a vaccine (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32520/21]

395. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if an alternative MRNA vaccine will be made available for those in the 50-69 age cohort if a vaccine (details supplied) is not available within an eight week period for the second dose of the vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32796/21]

418. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Health the position for persons aged over 60 receiving the second dose of a vaccine (details supplied); if the time between vaccines will be reduced from 12 weeks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32854/21]

452. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter regarding Covid-19 vaccinations (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33136/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 379, 395, 418 and 452 together.

On 4 June I announced a shorter interval between doses for the Vaxzevria® (AstraZeneca) vaccine. This follows updated recommendations from the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC), which have been endorsed by the Chief Medical Officer. NIAC has concluded that those of any age (without any previous COVID-19 infection), who have received their first dose of Vaxzevria® should receive their second dose 8-12 weeks later. The HSE recently received updated advice from NIAC in relation to reducing the dosing interval for the administration of the AstraZeneca vaccine from 12 weeks to 8. Extensive planning has been required to put in place a programme that will now see the remaining, approximately 450,000 people, in receipt of the AstraZeneca vaccine fully immunised through the administration of this second dose and it is expected to be substantially completed by 19 July.

Mental Health Services

380. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the status of the petition submitted to Minister of State for Mental Health and Older People from this Deputy in 2020 on behalf of a person (details supplied) calling for 24/7 access to emergency mental health care; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32530/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): Budget 2021 saw an additional €50 million allocated to Mental Health Services, bringing the total 2021 mental health budget to in excess of €1.1 billion, which is the biggest mental health budget on record. This represents an increase of over €400 million since 2012. The Government is committed to further development of all aspects of our mental health services, in line with our current policy *Sharing the Vision - A Mental Health Policy for Everyone*.

To plan for the ongoing and increasing need for mental health services, including 24/7 mental health care, the refreshed national mental health policy, *Sharing the Vision*, was published in June 2020. This policy sets out a 10-year plan for our services that addresses the needs of the population through a focus on the requirements of the individual. This policy was developed following a process of research into international innovation and best practice in mental health and an extensive national consultation of over 1,000 service users, family members, friends and carers and other stakeholders.

As our mental health effects and contributes to our overall health and wellbeing, it is only right that this refreshed policy is very closely aligned with *Sláintecare*, our ten-year roadmap to transform our health and social care services, and shares the *Sláintecare* vision of the right care in the right place at the right time.

Moreover, *Sharing the Vision* recognises that mental health is not a matter for the health sector alone. It sits in a much broader context of how society views mental health and how decisions can be made right across the spectrum of relevant public services to invest in the mental health and wellbeing of the population. Good mental health for the population of Ireland cannot be achieved without a whole-of-government approach. Consequently, implementation will be characterised by substantial cross departmental engagement.

Sharing the Vision seeks to create additional access routes to treatment and to work in partnership with service users and their families to ensure that service users have timely access to supports. The policy contains recommendations with regards alternative access routes to emergency care and proposes out-of-hours crisis cafés as a new referral option.

Additionally, the policy is aligned to and supports additional roll out of online mental health service provision accelerated by the advent of Covid 19, including initiatives such as:

- The national Crisis Text-Line, a voluntary, clinically supported texting service, free and available 24/7, which provides immediate support for people going through a mental health or emotional crisis;

- Availability of free online and face to face counselling;

- The new CAMHS Connect telepsychiatry service for HSE West which is expected to be rolled out nationally and which will pave the way for enhanced care provision for children and young people, ranging from presentations in Emergency Departments to more regular monitoring after crisis episodes. CAMHS Connect will improve access, reduce waiting times and address some staff recruitment and retention issues;

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- The www.yourmentalhealth.ie website provides a 'one-stop-shop' portal for people seeking information, supports and services, including information on accessing urgent help.

Out of hours crisis supports will be enhanced in line with Sharing the Vision and commitments set out in the HSE National Service Plan 2021. Funding has been allocated in 2021 for crisis resolution teams, crisis or community cafes, and CAMHS telehealth hubs.

Moreover, following investment from the Programme for Government Funding 2017, additional funding was obtained for the development of a model within all Community Healthcare Organisation (CHO) areas for the provision of extended seven-day mental health services within general adult services.

Prior to the pandemic most Community Mental Health Teams provided some form of seven day week service, this is still in place and available for existing mental health service users in a blended format in compliance with COVID-19 restrictions. Online supports are also available from YourMentalHealth.ie and through NGO partners, who can offer information and support via text, phone or video.

If a person is in crisis they are strongly recommended to contact the out-of-hours GP or attend the local emergency department where they will be seen by a mental health professional for appropriate assessment. The textline 50808 also offers 24/7 anonymous support by trained counsellors.

The outbreak of COVID-19 throughout the world is a source of significant stress and anxiety for many people. The Department of Health and the HSE continue to work with clinicians, healthcare providers and NGO's to promote positive mental wellbeing and provide services and interventions for those experiencing poor mental health. In addition to maintaining existing services, the HSE delivers and funds a wide range of mental health and psychosocial support services including online training, counselling and national health and wellbeing promotion initiatives. Psychosocial management teams in each HSE region have expanded services and continue to provide all community services, in so far as possible, while following COVID-19 guidelines to ensure the protection of service users and staff.

The Deputy will appreciate that there has been a significant increase in the workload of the Department recently, and consequently there has been some delay in responding to representations. A reply will issue directly in relation to the petition received from the individual concerned.

Disability Services

381. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the lack of follow-up physiotherapy for stroke survivors in Tallaght University Hospital; if his attention has been further drawn to the fact that patients who had been receiving daily physiotherapy sessions while staying in hospital have found themselves with no physiotherapy support provided when they are discharged leaving them with no other option but privately paid physio at a cost of €70 per half hour; and if his Department will be providing these facilities given that this service is vital to the progress for stroke survivors to lead a relatively independent life. [32540/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE

IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Departmental Inquiries

382. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health the status of the establishment of an inquiry into the historical licensing and prescribing of sodium valproate to treat epilepsy. [32552/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Details of the proposed inquiry into the historical licensing and use of sodium valproate in Ireland are currently being considered by officials within the Department of Health.

Health Services Staff

383. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health the status of the four currently unfilled epilepsy nurse specialist posts approved in 2018 to manage the mandatory patient safety requirements for women who are prescribed sodium valproate. [32553/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems.

The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Hospital Appointments Status

384. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a procedure for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32554/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Question No. 385 answered with Question No. 326.

Question No. 386 answered with Question No. 326.

Home Help Service

387. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health if personal assistance hours which have been approved will be put in place for a person (details supplied). [32563/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Question No. 388 answered with Question No. 340.

Health Services Staff

389. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if there are employment opportunities in County Kerry for audiologists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32570/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Question No. 390 answered with Question No. 340.

Question No. 391 answered with Question No. 340.

Hospital Appointments Status

392. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will be called for their surgical procedure; the reason for the delay in same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32576/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Covid-19 Pandemic

393. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health if he will ease Covid-19 restrictions in order that third-level university exchange students can undertake their required face-to-face interviews in foreign embassies located in Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32794/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy will be aware, on 29 June, Government announced the next phase of reopening the economy and society in line with Recovery and Resilience: The Path Ahead. While significant progress is being made in relation to the roll-out of our vaccination programme and the position had been broadly stable over the earlier part of June, the prevalence of the more transmissible Delta variant is rapidly increasing in Ireland and this poses a significant risk, in particular to those who are not yet fully vaccinated. For this reason, a number of higher risk indoor activities will not recommence as planned on 5 July, pending the implementation of a system to verify vaccination or immunity status.

Embassy operations and visa processing are a matter for relevant country authorities.

Significant and sustained progress has been made on suppressing the virus over recent months due to the huge effort of people across the country. By working together, we have saved lives and limited the impact of the disease on society in Ireland. To protect the gains of recent months we must continue to practice basic preventative behaviours and to follow public health guidelines.

Hospital Facilities

394. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the location identified for the new multidisciplinary early intervention and respite care centre (details supplied) for children with complex additional needs within the grounds of St. Otteran's Psychiatric Hospital, Waterford; if, as circumstances allow, he will visit the proposed site with representatives of a charity with a view to progressing the development which was included in the HSE Capital Plan for 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32795/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Funding has been allocated in the 2021 Capital Programme to appoint a design team for the proposed disability centre at St Otteran's on the Saint John's Hill campus. The generous contribution of €1m from the Touching Hearts Foundation has been included in the detail of the project.

Subject to continued funding and progression through the Public Spending Code, a tender will be initiated. Once the design team is appointed, they will produce a programme for the works as part of their Stage 1 report.

Question No. 395 answered with Question No. 379.

Vaccination Programme

396. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the status of the catch-up scheme for the HPV vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32797/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The ages at which vaccines are rec-

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ommended in the immunisation schedule are chosen by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) in order to give each child the best possible protection against vaccine preventable diseases.

As the HPV vaccine is preventative it is intended to be administered, if possible, before a person becomes sexually active, that is, before a person is first exposed to HPV infection.

Therefore, the gender-neutral HPV vaccination programme targets all girls and boys in their first year of secondary school to provide maximum coverage.

My Department will continue to be guided by the NIAC's recommendations on any emerging evidence on this issue in the future.

It is important to note that the schools-based immunisation programme for the 2019/2020 academic year has been completed and the uptake rates for the HPV vaccine in that academic year are 82% for the first dose of the vaccine and 77% for the second dose.

This is the highest uptake for the HPV vaccination programme since 2015/2016 and is particularly encouraging because it was the first year that boys were included in the programme and it shows that the provision of vaccine in community clinics did not adversely affect the uptake.

The programme for the academic year 2020/2021 was paused during the first few months of 2021 due to school closures and redeployment of staff to the COVID-19 immunisation programme.

The inputting of uptake information for the schools-based programme has also been delayed due to redeployment of administrative staff. However, Community Healthcare Organisations have reported that the vast majority of second level schools had their first dose of HPV vaccine delivered between October and December 2020.

The uptake rate for the first dose of the HPV vaccine, in the 2020/2021 academic year, is 67% as of the 12th May 2021, and this figure is expected to increase because data input on vaccine uptake is ongoing.

The HSE expects the HPV vaccination programme for 2020/21 to be substantially complete before the start of the 2021/22 academic year.

Departmental Advertising

397. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health 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. [32798/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): My Department spent €76,110.47 on social media advertising for the period of 1 January 2021 to 12 June 2021.

Departmental Expenditure

398. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health 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. [32799/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): My Department has spent €68,188 on social media content production for the period of 1 January 2021 to 12 June 2021.

Departmental Expenditure

399. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health 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. [32800/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): My Department had no public relations consultancy costs for the period of 1 January 2021 to 30 June 2021.

Cannabis for Medicinal Use

400. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health if he will approve a drug manufactured by a company (details supplied) as part of the medicinal cannabis access programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32803/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The products you refer to are manufactured by the dispensing pharmacy in the Netherlands. Owing to Dutch government restrictions cannabis-based oils may not be commercially exported to pharmacies or wholesalers however they will allow the filling of individual prescriptions for collection by the patient, the patient's family or a representative.

Representations were made to the Dutch authorities about having the products exported to Ireland to facilitate their inclusion in the Access Programme if the producers wished to do so. The Dutch authorities replied that magistral preparations may only be provided directly to patients or their representative on the basis of a prescription, presented for dispensing.

Since April 2020, owing to the pandemic the Department has been collecting patient's prescriptions from the Netherlands and delivering them to patients' homes. These collections take place approximately every four weeks and will continue post-pandemic.

As a result of the prohibition of commercial export of the cannabis-based products the manufacturers cannot apply to the Health Products Regulatory Authority to have the products included in the Medical Cannabis Access Programme.

Departmental Policies

401. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health 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. [32804/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): My Department is engaged in policy development and implementation across the full spectrum of issues that impact health and well-being in Ireland. To support the Deputy I have listed below the new policy introduced by my Department in the last year which mark significant milestones in the development of health policy for Ireland. These documents are available in detail on gov.ie/health

I would also refer the Deputy to the Department's Annual Report 2020 which is being fi-

nalised at present and will be published in due course. This important strategic document details the achievements of the Department over that time, in particular our achievements as they relate our commitments in the Programme for Government: Our Shared Future are currently.

Date of Publication	Title	Category
08/07/2020	COVID-19 Temporary Assistance Payment Scheme (TAPS)	Policy
27/07/2020	Procedural Values for Decision-making in a Pandemic	Guideline
19/08/2020	Report of the COVID-19 Nursing Homes Expert Panel	Policy review
01/10/2020	National Healthy Eating Guidelines for One to Four Year Olds	Guideline
22/10/2020	Guidelines for Operating Drug and Alcohol Support Groups and Treatment Programmes During the COVID-19 Pandemic	Guideline
29/10/2020	Launch of the “Keep Well” campaign	Campaign
25/11/2020	Extension of National Suicide Reduction Strategy to 2024	Policy
08/12/2020	Provisional Vaccine Allocation Groups	Guideline
15/12/2020	COVID-19 Vaccination Strategy and Implementation Plan	Policy
16/12/2020	Publication of the Final Report of the Expert Group on Tort Reform and the Management of Clinical Negligence Claims	Policy review
04/01/2021	Sixth Annual Report of the National Healthcare Quality Reporting System	Report
10/02/2021	Department of Health Open Beds Report for October 2020	Report
18/02/2021	Department of Health Open Beds Report for November 2020	Report
19/02/2021	Transforming Lives – Working Group 1 Report on Future Needs for Disability Services	Report

Questions - Written Answers

Date of Publication	Title	Category
25/02/2021	Sláintecare in Action 2019	Policy Review
04/03/2021	Department of Health Statement of Strategy 2021-2023	Strategy
10/03/2021	Department of Health Open Beds Report for December 2020	Report
01/04/2021	Report of the COVID-19 Rapid Testing Group	Report
01/04/2021	Expert Review Body on Nursing and Midwifery	Report
07/04/2021	Department of Health Annual Report 2019	Report
05/05/2021	National Cancer Strategy Implementation Report 2020	Report
07/05/2021	Final Evaluation Report on the Impact of Implementing the Draft Policy on Graduate, Specialist and Advanced Nursing Practice September 2020	Report
11/05/2021	Sláintecare Implementation Strategy and Action Plan 2021-2023	Strategy/Action Plan
13/05/2021	Post-change data collection report for the Safe Nurse Staffing and Skill Mix Framework – Phase 2	Report
13/05/2021	Final Report: Short Term Review of Clinical Placement Allowances for Student Nurses and Midwives	Report
28/05/2021	Supporting the Recovery	Guidelines
04/06/2021	Review of Pricing System for Long Term Residential Care Facilities	Review
23/06/2021	Building Momentum: Health Sector Action Plan	Action Plan
29/06/2021	Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 – Annual Report on Notifications 2020	Report
12/07/2021	Department of Health Open Beds for March 2021	Report

Departmental Schemes

402. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the status of plans to introduce a no-fault vaccination compensation scheme for severe adverse reactions to State-promoted vaccination programmes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32805/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In June 2018, the Government agreed to the establishment of the expert group to review the management of clinical negligence claims. It was chaired by the High Court judge, Mr. Justice Charles Meenan. The expert group examined the system from the perspective of the person who has made the claim to explore if there is a better way to deal effectively, yet more sensitively, with certain cases.

Mr. Justice Meenan submitted the final report on the current system for managing clinical negligence claims to the then Minister for Health and Minister for Justice in January 2020, prior to the onset of the Covid pandemic. The Government subsequently published the Meenan report in December 2020. One of the report's recommendations is that a compensation scheme be established.

On foot of a request from my Department, the Health Research Board, HRB, carried out an evidence review on the vaccine injury redress programme in other jurisdictions, which was completed in March 2019. The expert group's report, in addition to the HRB's evidence review, and consultation with other Departments and relevant State agencies will inform the development of proposals regarding the establishment of a compensation scheme, including the need for primary legislation, and work to advance policy development in this regard is under way in the Department.

There are no plans at present for the introduction in Ireland of a COVID-19 specific vaccine compensation scheme.

Departmental Policies

403. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health 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. [32806/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In respect of my Department, the Public Appointments Service is utilised for recruitment of new staff. All recruitment is carried out according to the "Code of practice for the employment of people with disability in the Civil Service" and the Public Appointments Service "Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2021-2023".

The Department of Health and the Public Appointments Service aims to ensure that people with disabilities are placed in jobs that are matched to their skills and abilities and are not disadvantaged by their disability.

All employees, and especially new staff, are encouraged to engage with the Departmental Disability Liaison Officer and Strategic HR in order to successfully integrate into their role and to remove obstacles to the achievement of their potential which they may encounter which may relate to a disability.

The agencies under the aegis of the Department of Health recruit under license from the Office of the Commission of Public Service Appointments, be that they are licensed or the recruitment agency they utilise is licensed. One of the conditions when a license is granted is

that the licensee must agree to abide by the principles and codes of practice published by the Commission.

The Codes set out the regulatory framework for such appointment processes and centre on five recruitment principles. One of the recruitment principles is that a fair employment process is applied with consistency.

The Commission opposes any form of direct or indirect discrimination, whether active or passive. The selection process adopted and the way in which it is applied must be undertaken with full commitment to equality of opportunity. Office holders have an obligation to treat candidates fairly, to a consistent standard and in a consistent manner.

A specific Code exists in relation to the appointment of a person or persons with a disability, as defined in the Disability Act 2005. This Code includes provisions to help with accessibility and the treatment of applicants during the appointment process.

National Maternity Hospital

404. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if he is satisfied that the originally announced proposals for the new national maternity hospital continue to be part of the plan; if particular issues have arisen which might derail the plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32807/21]

416. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health the current status and progress of the proposed new national maternity hospital; if the originally intended location of the hospital has been confirmed; if agreement has been reached in respect of the site with the donor; if specific conditions are being imposed or introduced; if there has been a deviation from the original plan and proposal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32825/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 404 and 416 together.

The Government is committed to the development of the new National Maternity Hospital (NMH) planned for the St Vincent's University Hospital Campus at Elm Park, as set out in the Programme for Government. Significant progress has been made on the capital project, with planning permission for the hospital secured in 2017 and, in 2018, the awarding of the contract for substantial enabling works.

However, the ownership and governance arrangements are more complex. The proposed corporate and clinical governance arrangements for the new NMH at Elm Park were set out in the Mulvey Agreement, which was finalised in 2016 following an extensive mediation process between the NMH and the St. Vincent's Healthcare Group, published thereafter and noted by Government in 2017. The Mulvey Agreement provides for the establishment of a new company - National Maternity Hospital at Elm Park DAC - which will have clinical and operational, as well as financial and budgetary, independence in the provision of maternity, gynaecology and neonatal services. The draft legal framework that has been developed is designed to copper fasten these arrangements.

I have been very clear that I will not bring anything to Government unless it provides assurances around all legally permissible services being provided in the new NMH. In addition, the safeguarding of the State's investment must also be affirmed beyond doubt.

In that context, there has been further engagement with the stakeholders in relation to this

project, and this will continue as we move toward the finalisation of the legal arrangements. However, I will not be making any further comment on the nature of this engagement until it concludes.

Healthcare Policy

405. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the degree to which discussions continue to take place with general practitioners and consultants in regard to the implementation of Sláintecare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32808/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In November 2019, the ICGP invited the Sláintecare Programme to establish a joint committee to share and promote strategic ideas for the future development of General Practice in Ireland which will deliver the right care in the right place at the right time. Throughout 2020, there was significant engagement with General Practice in reshaping service models in a COVID-19 context. A Chronic Disease Management (CDM) Programme, having regard for COVID-19, was developed in conjunction with the IMO and the Department of Health. A Research Hub, in collaboration with The Irish College of General Practitioners, HSE and Department of Health, was established to address key requirements to drive forward improvements on capacity and supports to general practice.

The Sláintecare Implementation Strategy & Action Plan 2021-2023 was agreed by Government in May this year. GPs will continue to have an important role in its implementation. The Enhanced Community Care workstream of Project 1: Implement the Health Service Capacity Review (2018) promotes the shift of care out of acute hospitals into the community and closer to a person's home, where safely possible. The ECC workstream will ensure maximum impact for citizens in avoiding hospital admission as far as possible through initiatives that will see care delivered within the community, at or near a person's home where appropriate. These initiatives include chronic disease management by GPs and direct GP referral to community radiology.

Project 3: Streamline Care Pathways from Prevention to Discharge focusses on the development of integrated care pathways that are based on delivering the best outcomes for patients can help to drive streamlined integration between care settings at a national, regional and local level. Pathways will be agreed between GPs, primary/community care providers, community specialist teams and hospital-based specialists can provide better links across these care settings and will ensure that resources are used to provide the best care for patients and that services are provided in a more timely way.

The implementation of the new Public Only Consultant Contract will be the first step along the road to public-only care in public healthcare facilities.

The draft Consultant Contract was forwarded to the representative bodies for hospital consultants on 31 May for consideration. The Department of Health and the Health Service Executive have met with, and written to, the Representative Bodies to express their willingness and openness to engage on the draft Contract, in line with the relevant government decisions. The responses from the representative bodies to an invitation to engage on the contract are under consideration by the Department.

It is expected the contract will be finalised and introduced within the healthcare system as soon as engagement has concluded.

National Children's Hospital

406. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which the new children's hospital plan is proceeding as anticipated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32809/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The New Children's Hospital Project, comprising the main hospital at St James's campus in Dublin, and two paediatric outpatient and urgent care centres at Connolly and Tallaght hospitals, is a Government priority.

The National Paediatric Hospital Development Board (NPHDB) has the statutory responsibility and resources to plan, design, build, furnish and equip the new children's hospital.

The main hospital was scheduled to be substantially completed by August 2022 and, following a commissioning process of 9-10 months, to open in 2023. This contractual completion date has been revised to October 2022 as the contractor was granted an extension of time by the Employer's Representative, in line with the contract, due to the impact of Covid-19 and the closure of the site in March 2020.

The NPHDB has now advised my Department that BAM's contractually compliant programme, approved by the Employer's Representative in March 2021, forecasts a substantial completion date of December 2023. Therefore, if BAM can meet its own schedule, the new hospital could open in 2024, after the necessary commissioning period.

The NPHDB and BAM are currently engaged in a process to allow the forecasted December 2023 completion date to be met. There remain external risks beyond the control of the Development Board and the contractor to that timeline, arising from Brexit, the global pandemic, global supply chain difficulties and shortages of construction raw materials. However, BAM, as a Tier 1 construction company, has global reach into supply chains and is doing its best to mitigate those risks.

Despite delays and Covid-19 restrictions, significant progress is being made on the site at St James's and the new children's hospital building is taking shape. Over 90% of all concrete has been placed, with the concrete frame now complete. In March, a key milestone was reached when the last section of the seventh-storey was poured with concrete, meaning that the building has now topped out. The infill concrete slabs over the steelwork frame, closing in the course, will be complete by August 2021.

Glazing and façade works are continuing such that the distinctive shape of the building is becoming clear. It is anticipated that the majority of the building will be weathertight by the autumn. The fit out of certain internal areas has begun, with discernible rooms and areas taking shape. The primary Mechanical and Electrical Plant comprising boilers; combined heat and power, generators, transformers, main distribution boards and medical gases are well progressed with the focus now on primary and secondary distribution around the building.

A major milestone was reached in July 2019, when the Urgent Care Centre at the Connolly Hospital campus opened, providing a new model of ambulatory care for children. The opening of the second of the three new campuses, at Tallaght Hospital later this year, will be another important milestone in the NCH programme and in the delivery of children's health services.

Construction work on the 4,600m² facility is nearing an end, with a substantial completion date scheduled for September 2021. It will then be handed over to Children's Health Ireland to open for services after an 8-week period of operational commissioning and equipping.

Healthcare Policy

407. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which the national trauma care plan is best placed to meet any and all emergencies as they arise regardless of geographical location; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32810/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The National Trauma Strategy, A Trauma System for Ireland, published in February 2018, recommended the introduction of an inclusive trauma system, that will be delivered by two regional networks, each with a Major Trauma Centre that is linked to a number of Trauma Units. Services will be networked and co-ordinated along standardised pathways to ensure that the right care is delivered in the right place at the right time. The Strategy recommended the trauma system should include one Major Trauma Centre to be based in Dublin servicing the Central Trauma Network, and another to be based in Cork University Hospital servicing the South Trauma Network.

The Government, on 27 April 2021, designated the Mater Hospital as the Major Trauma Centre for the Central Trauma Network and St Vincent's and Tallaght University Hospitals as the Trauma Units for Dublin.

Implementing the recommendations of the National Trauma Strategy is a key action of the Sláintecare Action Plan. It is expected that it will take between five to seven years to implement the Strategy in full.

As an inclusive trauma system, the Trauma System for Ireland will consider all aspects of a patient's journey and will ensure that all patients have access to the level of care they require irrespective of their location. This will include pre-hospital services so that high level and consistent care is available.

Trauma triage will mean that where appropriate patients suffering major trauma will be brought directly to a MTC if they are within 45 minutes of such a facility.

Where patients are outside this they will be brought to the nearest Trauma Unit for resuscitation and stabilisation. Trauma Units will be developed to ensure that a consistent level of care is provided across the country. If a patient's care needs exceed the capabilities of the TU they will be transferred to a MTC. Transport services and protocols will be developed to ensure prompt and safe access to the MTC which by its nature will be able to meet any and all requirements of the trauma patient.

The trauma system will develop ongoing care and rehabilitation services-complex specialist, post-acute and community so that a rehabilitation needs assessment and prescription will be completed and a patient's own rehabilitation needs can be tailored and met at the closest and most appropriate facility to their home.

In summary the trauma system will develop networks that will bring patients to the facility that can best meet their needs in a safe and consistent manner irrespective of their location.

Hospital Facilities

408. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which the Naas Hospital development plans are proceeding; when work is likely to start on-site given the urgent necessity for the extension of the facilities and the necessity to meet the increasing demand; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32811/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): There are a number of projects included in the Capital Programme for 2021 at Naas General Hospital. These include the Day Procedures/Endoscopy Unit, Oncology and Physical Therapy Unit and a new Acute Mental Health Unit.

Funding has been allocated to progress the project design for the Day Procedures/Endoscopy Unit Oncology and Physical Therapy Unit project. The procurement of the design team is underway and nearing completion.

The scope of the Acute Mental Health Unit has changed considerably and is currently being reviewed. The service area has progressed an extensive exercise to examine latest delivered mental health projects including the National Forensic Mental Health Service Hospital facility in Portrane. Following this review, service requirements have been rescoped to incorporate different room layouts, wider corridors, and additional recreation space. Other scope changes have been made such as inclusion of a decking carpark and seclusion rooms. The schedule of accommodation has just been confirmed and the design team are now working on the Stage 1 report.

The delivery of capital projects is a dynamic process and subject to successful completion of the various approval stages as well of availability of funding.

The development of a modular isolation unit providing 12 single isolation rooms at Naas General Hospital is currently being progressed. The final contract to construct this unit is expected to be agreed within the next two weeks with offsite fabrication and associated site works commencing in September. Construction of the modular unit is due for completion in Q1 2022.

Primary Care Centres

409. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the current number of primary care centres in County Kildare; the number proposed; the delivery date of each; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32812/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The development of new Primary Care Centres (PCCs) is a key component of the efforts to enhance community care, and to deliver care in a location at, or as near as possible to an individual's home, where it is safe and clinically appropriate to do so.

The most recent available update from the Health Service Executive advises that there are currently 142 operational PCCs nationwide, with a further 30 PCCs scheduled to open before the end of 2023.

Those PCCs currently operational in Co. Kildare are listed below. In addition, two further locations in Leixlip and Maynooth are currently at a very early stage in the development process.

Primary Care Centre Location	Date Operational
Athy/Castledermot	2020
Celbridge	2017
Clane/Kilmeague	2014
Kilcock	2018
Kildare Town	2016
Naas	2011

Primary Care Centre Location	Date Operational
Newbridge	2013
Rathangan	2015

Home Help Service

410. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if additional home help will be allocated to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32813/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Nursing Homes

411. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if he will extend reforms to the nursing home support scheme to address inequalities (details supplied) in the scheme which leads to fair deal poverty for some nursing home residents; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32815/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The Nursing Homes Support Scheme (NHSS), commonly referred to as Fair Deal, is a system of financial support for people who require long-term residential care. Participants contribute to the cost of their care according to their means while the State pays the balance of the cost. The NHSS covers the cost of the standard components of long-term residential care which are:

- Nursing and personal care appropriate to the level of care needs of the person
- Bed and board
- Basic aids and appliances necessary to assist a person with the activities of daily living
- Laundry service

A person's eligibility for other schemes, such as the medical card scheme or the drugs payment scheme, is unaffected by participation in the NHSS or residence in a nursing home. In determining the services covered by the NHSS it was considered very important that the care recipient and the taxpayer would be protected and would not end up paying for the same services twice. For this reason, medications and aids that are already prescribed for individuals under an existing scheme are not included in the services covered by the NHSS, as this would involve effectively paying twice for the same service.

Although the NHSS covers core living expenses, residents can still incur some costs in a nursing home, such as social programmes, newspapers or hairdressing. In recognition of this, anyone in receipt of financial support under the NHSS retains at least 20% of their income. The minimum amount that is retained is the equivalent of 20% of the State Pension (Non-Contrib-

utory). An operator should not seek payment from residents for items which are covered by the NHSS, the medical card or any other existing scheme.

Part 7 of the Health Act 2007 (Care and Welfare of Residents in Designated Centres for Older People) Regulations 2013 stipulates that the registered provider of the nursing home must agree a contract in writing with each resident on their admission to the nursing home. This contract must include details of the services to be provided to that resident and the fees to be charged. Residents should never be charged fees which are not set out in the contract. The Department of Health and the HSE are not a party to such contracts which are concluded between each resident and their nursing home.

Registered providers of nursing home care are obliged to provide an accessible and effective complaints procedure. Concerns about additional charges should in the first instance be taken up with the nursing home provider. The Office of the Ombudsman can examine complaints about the actions of a range of public bodies and, from 24 August 2015, complaints relating to the administrative actions of private nursing homes. The Office of the Ombudsman normally only deals with a complaint once the individual has already gone through the complaints procedure of the private nursing home concerned.

The Competition and Consumer Protection Commission (CCPC) is an independent statutory body with a dual mandate to enforce competition and consumer protection law in Ireland. CCPC's mission is to promote competition and enhance consumer welfare. The CCPC has published consumer protection guidelines for contracts of care in long-term residential care services for older people. The guidelines set out the obligations and responsibilities that providers must adhere to under consumer protection law and are aimed at providing greater transparency, clarity and certainty for consumers.

Mental Health Services

412. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the amount of money allocated to each CHO area in tabular form for mental health in each of the years 2017 to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32816/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Question No. 413 answered with Question No. 340.

Question No. 414 answered with Question No. 316.

Question No. 415 answered with Question No. 340.

Question No. 416 answered with Question No. 404.

Hospital Waiting Lists

417. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 986 of 28 April 2021, the reason funding was refused under the treatment abroad scheme in the case of a person (details supplied) given a previous application was approved on 20 September 2019; if the procedures are available in hospitals here; if so, the hospital that carries out same; if there is a waiting list; if so, the timeframe involved; if he will examine the case of the person as a matter of urgency with a view to ensuring that the two procedures recommended by their consultants are expedited; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32853/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services.

Nevertheless, the HSE has advised that a response on this matter, as raised in Parliamentary Question 986 of 20th April 2021, was issued to the Deputy on 13th May 2021. The HSE indicated that as the procedure is available in Ireland it does not fall under the qualifying criteria for the Treatment Abroad Scheme. A multidisciplinary National Specialist Centre has been developed over two sites, at Cork University Maternity Hospital (CUMH) and the National Maternity Hospital (NMH) Dublin, and these sites have received specific funding from the HSE for the provision of these services. Full details of MESH removal services and contact information for relevant hospitals are available on the HSE website at www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/acute-hospitals-division/woman-infants/vaginal-mesh-implants/. The National Women and Infants Health Programme can also be contacted for general queries at smi.nwihp@hse.ie.

Question No. 418 answered with Question No. 379.

Health Services Staff

419. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the number of workers in section 39 agencies that are currently earning below the living wage; and the estimated annual cost of bringing them in line with this. [32879/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Section 39 agencies fall under Section 39 of the Health Act 2004 where the HSE provides a grant to allow the agency to provide services similar or ancillary to the HSE. Staff in Section 39 organisations were not subject to the provisions of FEMPI legislation and therefore did not receive those cuts that were applied to the pay of public servants. They were not and are not party to Public Service Agreements and are therefore not covered by the pay restoration provided for in these Agreements. While it is understood that pay savings were made by the organisations, the precise mix of pay cuts or other savings measures will have varied.

It would not be appropriate for me to respond on the remuneration of employees in Section 39 organisations as they are private employees. They are not civil or public servants and their terms and conditions of employment, once compliant with employment law, are a matter solely between the employer and employee.

Hospital Waiting Lists

420. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Health if he will address the wait time for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32880/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services.

Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Question No. 421 answered with Question No. 340.

Health Services

422. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health if a service (details supplied) will be reinstated; the reason funding was withdrawn; if there are plans for an alternative service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32882/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Health Services

423. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health if a person (details supplied) will have their service restored; the reason for the withdrawal of the service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32883/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Vaccination Programme

424. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter regarding a vaccine (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32887/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Ireland's COVID-19 vaccination programme strategy is to distribute all available vaccine as quickly as is operationally possible, prioritising those who are most vulnerable to COVID-19.

The programme is based on the principles of safety, effectiveness and fairness, with the objective of reducing severe illness, hospitalisations and deaths from COVID-19 infection.

The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The Committee's recommendations are based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practice in relation to immunisation. It makes recommendations on vaccination policy to the Department of Health. The NIAC review all data relating to COVID-19 vaccines on a rolling basis.

Following the recommendation for use of vaccines against COVID-19 by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and authorisation for use by the European Commission, the National Immunisation Advisory Committee develops guidance for their use in Ireland which is contained in the Immunisation Guidelines for Ireland. These guidelines are continuously updated and include guidance on all new vaccines as they are approved for use in Ireland.

The current Guidelines state:

There are currently four COVID-19 Vaccines authorised for use in Ireland. The vaccines are not interchangeable. For vaccines that have a two-dose schedule, the same vaccine should be used for both doses. The NIAC will continue to review the evidence concerning the safety and efficacy of a heterologous vaccination strategy (using a different vaccine for the first and subsequent doses of a multi-dose schedule) as it becomes available.

You can read the guidelines at:

www.hse.ie/eng/health/immunisation/hcpinfo/guidelines/covid19.pdf

Vaccination Programme

425. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health when a vaccine (details supplied) will be recommended in Ireland for the age group of 12 to 15 years of age in particular those in this age group with underlying conditions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32896/21]

431. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health when children aged 12 to 15 with conditions leading to a higher risk of severe outcomes from Covid-19 can expect to be vaccinated following the recent approval by the European Medicines Agency of a vaccine (details supplied) for children aged 12 to 15. [32960/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 425 and 431 together.

Ireland welcomes the EMA age extension recommendation for the COVID-19 vaccine Comirnaty to include use in children aged 12 to 15. The National Immunisation Advisory Committee is reviewing the matter and will make a recommendation as appropriate. Currently, Ireland's COVID-19 Vaccination Programme is administering vaccines to those aged 16+.

Vaccination Programme

426. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will receive a date to receive a second dose of the Covid-19 vaccine. [32915/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): On 4 June I announced a shorter interval between doses for the Vaxzevria® (AstraZeneca) vaccine. This follows updated recommendations from the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC), which have been endorsed by the Chief Medical Officer. The NIAC has concluded that those of any age (without any previous COVID-19 infection), who have received their first dose of Vaxzevria® should receive their second dose 8-12 weeks later.

The HSE recently received updated advice from the NIAC in relation to reducing the dose interval for the administration of the AstraZeneca vaccine from 12 weeks to 8. Extensive planning has been required to put in place a programme that will now see the remaining, approximately 450,000 people, in receipt of the AstraZeneca vaccine fully immunised through the administration of this second dose and it is expected to be substantially completed by 19 July.

Health Services

427. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health the cost of running the former St. Michael's psychiatric unit in Clonmel, County Tipperary in each of the five years up until it closed in 2012. [32925/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Question No. 428 answered with Question No. 316.

General Practitioner Services

429. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 152 of 22 April 2021, if he will again seek a response from the Health Service Executive in relation to the lack of a general practitioner service in Enfield, County Meath; and if the reply will issue as a matter of urgency. [32958/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Health Services Staff

430. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health when section 39 workers can expect to see full restoration of their pay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32959/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Section 39 agencies are agencies under Section 39 of the Health Act 2004 where the HSE provides a grant to allow the agency to provide services similar or ancillary to the HSE. They were not and are not party to the Public Service Agreements and are therefore not covered by the pay restoration provided for in these Agreements.

In October 2018, an agreement was reached by the parties at the Workplace Relations Commission in relation to a process of pay restoration for staff employed in a pilot group of 50 section 39 organisations who are funded by way of a Service Level Agreement (SLA). Pay restoration commenced with an annual pay increase of up to €1,000 in April 2019. Any outstanding balance was and will be paid in two equal amounts in October 2020 and October 2021.

The agreement reached at the WRC noted that some of the organisations (approximately 250) which did not form part of the pilot phase are also likely to have pay restoration issues. A further WRC engagement followed in December 2020 in relation to a final phase of 250 SLA funded organisations who were identified as part of the earlier agreement. A payment arrangement consisting of three phases was agreed with the first two payments to be made in 2021.

Pay restoration was applicable to Section 39 organisations who met certain criteria, rather than types of individual workers that are employed in them. The list of section 39 organisations that was compiled, included only agencies that had service arrangements in place back in 2013 and that were still under service arrangements in 2019. Only organisations who received in excess of an agreed, specified amount from the HSE by way of the Service Level Agreement process were included.

Pay restoration is absolutely limited and only applicable to those included in the initial WRC agreement.

I can also confirm that there is no scope to revisit the eligibility criteria for the process.

Question No. 431 answered with Question No. 425.

Hospital Services

432. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that women are being refused gynaecology care in emergency departments in State-run hospitals that have gynaecology wards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32971/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I understand, from interactions with the Deputy's Office, that the matter in question related to care at the emergency departments in certain private hospitals, rather than HSE hospitals.

The Department of Health does not have responsibility for private hospitals and so cannot provide specific information in relation to the hospitals concerned or the health services that they provide.

The HSE has advised that, all public funded and provided 24/7 Emergency Departments in our acute general hospitals are designed and delivered such that they will manage patients presenting with any symptoms, i.e. there are no clinical exclusion criteria. In addition, further

to triage and review, an emergency department may place the patient on an alternative treatment pathway which may include onward referral as required.

Health Services Staff

433. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Health if additional staff will be recruited for a centre (details supplied); when and the location in which he expects these positions to be advertised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32972/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Cannabis for Medicinal Use

434. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health when the commencement of the medicinal cannabis access programme will happen in a practical sense; when this medicine will be available to eligible epilepsy patients by prescription who are in urgent need of this medicine; if this medicine will be covered by the long-term illness card and medical card; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32976/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The provision of the Medical Cannabis Access Programme (MCAP) as a result of recommendations by the Health Products Regulatory Authority in their “Cannabis for Medical User – A Scientific Review”.

The review stated that if the policy decision is to make cannabis available for medical purposes, the HPRA advised that it should recognise patient need, but be evidence based. It was advised, that treatment with cannabis be only permitted under a controlled access programme for the treatment of patients with the following medical conditions which have failed to respond to standard treatments;

- spasticity associated with multiple sclerosis;
- intractable nausea and vomiting associated with chemotherapy;
- severe, refractory (treatment-resistant) epilepsy.

Subsequently the Minister for Health established an Expert Reference Group to advise on the development of a Medical Cannabis Access Programme. This Group developed detailed Clinical Guidelines for the MCAP to be followed by clinicians, which contained inter alia guidance on ingredient combinations that are recommended for each of the three indications included in the MCAP

The Medicinal Cannabis Access programme (MCAP) is a 5-year pilot programme. The purpose of the programme is to facilitate access to acceptable cannabis-based products for medical use that are of a standardised quality and which meet the requirements outlined in the Misuse of Drugs (Prescription and Control of Supply of Cannabis for Medical Use) Regulations 2019

(as amended).

There are currently 4 products assessed by the HPRA for inclusion in Schedule 1 of the Regulations, more products are currently being assessed by the HPRA.

Reimbursement of the products, prescribed by approved medical consultants and supplied through community pharmacies for a specified therapeutic indication in line with Schedule 2 of the Misuse of Drugs (Prescription and Control of Supply of Cannabis for Medical Use) Regulations 2019 (as amended) will be on an individual named patient basis aligned to the patient's eligibility under the community drug schemes (Medical Card, Long Term Illness Scheme and Drugs Payment Scheme). It cannot be assumed that reimbursement approval will be forthcoming on submission of applications. A reimbursement decision will be communicated with the prescribing consultant in writing.

The HSE has indicated that the medical cannabis access programme is rapidly progressing and I hope to be in a position to update the Deputy shortly.

Mental Health Services

435. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if the appropriate support can be provided by CAMHS including documentation outlining medical history and detailed interaction with psychological services in the case of a child (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32996/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Primary Medical Certificates

436. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the number of applications waiting for a primary medical certificate by county; the current application processing time for a primary medical certificate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32997/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the Health Service Executive (HSE). However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and to resume normal services.

Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Dental Services

437. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if he will directly intervene in the crisis in dental services for medical card holders in County Kerry given there are currently no dental practices in the county providing dental services for medical card patients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [32998/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTSS) provides dental care, free of charge to medical card holders aged 16 and over. These services are provided by independent dental practitioners who have a contract with the HSE. Patients may choose to have their treatment undertaken by any dentist who participates in the Scheme.

I am aware that there has been a reduction in the numbers of dentists participating in the DTSS since the beginning of the current COVID-19 pandemic. Some people are experiencing problems in accessing a service close to their home. However, I have been assured by the HSE that their local services on the ground will assist any persons who are experiencing problems in accessing a service.

The national approach to future oral health service provision will be informed by Smile agus Sláinte, the National Oral Health Policy, which was published in 2019. The aim of the policy is to develop a model of care that will enable preventative approaches to be prioritised, improve access, and support interventions appropriate to current and future oral health needs.

I am committed to ensuring the sustainability and viability of the DTSS, which will need to be revised to align it with modern evidence and the aims of the new Policy. There was an intention to commence a review of the DTSS contract last year. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, this was not possible. Officials in my Department are currently engaging with the Irish Dental Association to commence this process.

Covid-19 Pandemic

438. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who have arrived in Ireland from the UK since the requirement for home quarantining was introduced; the number of those who have taken PCR tests after five days of quarantining as has been the rule up until now; and the percentage of those PCR tests that are negative and positive, respectively. [33015/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Since 4th February travellers arriving from the Great Britain to Ireland have been required to complete a period of 14-day home quarantine. Under the current regulations (S.I. 135/2021) this legal requirement to home quarantine can be shortened if a negative/not-detected result is obtained from a PCR test taken no less than 5 days after arrival.

All passengers arriving into the state are required to complete a COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form (PLF) in accordance with SI 45/2021. There are limited exemptions from this requirement, as set out in the regulations, such as for international transport workers or for diplomats. It should be noted that PLF data does not constitute formal arrival data into the state, due to the different intended purpose for the system and also the number of exempted persons as set out above. In addition, some passengers may complete a PLF in advance but be unable to travel as intended, and the data below may include some duplicates for certain travellers. Passengers may have completed a PLF and continued their journey without staying overnight in the state

or having transiting onto Northern Ireland.

According to data provided by the Passenger Locator Form service provider the total number from the UK is 135,390 for the period 4th Feb 2021 to 13th July 2021. This figure only accounts for the incoming adult passengers and does not take into account children arriving to the State.

On 4 June, the HSE launched a test booking facility which allows intending travellers to Ireland to pre-book a RT-PCR test from the HSE, free of charge, five days after their arrival. The test may be booked at a time and place convenient to the address the person will be staying at. In addition, any person wishing to take a test may also present as a walk-in at any of the HSE swabbing centres located around the country, details of which are available on the HSE website. It is not possible to provide statistics on tests booked through the platform by country of travel.

Medicinal Products

439. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider new arrangements for patients using a drug manufactured by a company (details supplied) who currently have to pre-pay for medication and reclaim the costs resulting in many having to hold €10,000 available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33028/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The products you refer to are manufactured by the dispensing pharmacy in the Netherlands. The Dutch authorities will not allow the commercial export of oil-based cannabis products to pharmacies or wholesalers. Representations were made to the Dutch authorities about having the products exported to Ireland to facilitate their inclusion in the Access Programme if the producers wished to do so. The Dutch authorities replied that magistral preparations may only be provided directly to patients or their representative on the basis of a prescription, presented for dispensing.

Since April 2020 owing to the travel restrictions and quarantine requirements the Department of Health has been collecting patients prescribed products and delivering them to Irish patient's homes, collections occur approximately every four weeks. In December 2020 the Minister for Health said this scheme would be made permanent.

Owing to the restrictions the manufacturers of the Dutch products are not in a position to apply to the Health Products Regulatory Authority to have the products included in the Access Programme and treated in the same manner as the products included in the Access Programme.

It is a requirement for patients or their families to pay the dispensing pharmacy in the Netherlands and a reimbursement application can subsequently be made to the Primary Care Reimbursement Service in the HSE.

Pursuant to Section 10B of the Health Act 2004 the Minister for Health shall not give a direction under section 10, or specify a priority or performance target under section 10A, as respects

(a) any function of the Executive relating to the provision of treatment or a health or personal social service to any particular person,

(b) any function of the Executive relating to a decision concerning—

(i) whether or not a particular person is eligible for a particular health or personal social service (including the payment of a grant or allowance),

(ii) the extent to which and the manner in which a person is eligible for any such service.

I have asked Departmental officials to examine this issue further with the HSE.

Vaccination Programme

440. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if a person (details supplied) will be facilitated in obtaining the Covid-19 vaccine at the earliest possible date given the necessity for special arrangements in line with their medical condition; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33029/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Question No. 441 answered with Question No. 340.

Mental Health Services

442. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 150 of 3 June 2021, the cost of the initial pilot project; the number of staff required; the salary cost of staff inclusive of salary and PRSI costs; the type of training required; the cost of training in tabular form; the duration of the pilot project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33066/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Hospital Services

443. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the current and capital cost of a new specialist eating disorder bed per year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33067/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be

advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Health Services Staff

444. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the number of clinicians on each specialist eating disorder team; the estimated cost of employing each clinician, respectively inclusive of salary and PRSI costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33068/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Mental Health Services

445. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the capital and revenue cost of a mental health bed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33069/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Medicinal Products

446. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health if toilax has been withdrawn for use in Ireland; if there is a supply issue given that it is essential in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33070/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicinal products under the community drug schemes, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013. The HSE maintains a Reimbursement List of medicinal products that are provided under the General Medical Services Scheme or the Drugs Payment Scheme. These products are approved for the schemes by the HSE.

The HSE have advised that Toilax is not on the Reimbursement List. However, the product has been approved on an individual patient basis through Discretionary Hardship Arrangements.

Pharmacies have recently been unable to source the product as it is now discontinued.

Therefore, the HSE has approved alternative therapies prescribed for patients through these arrangements.

Departmental Expenditure

447. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Health the annual capital funding received by each agency under section 38 of the Health Act 2004 in each of the years 2016 to 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33073/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Please see attached information on annual capital funding received by agencies, broken down by ICT and non-ICT, in each of the years between 2016 and 2020, and Year to Date in 2021.

[Capital Funding]

Nursing Homes

448. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the long-term support scheme which will be put in place to support the private nursing home sector in the medium and long term given that the temporary assistance payment scheme is due to cease on 30 June 2021; if he will consider extending the scheme until a permanent scheme which supports the sector continues to ensure measures implemented derived from Covid-19 bring lasting improvements within the sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33074/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The Temporary Assistance Payment Scheme (TAPS) was established in April 2020 as a temporary administrative measure in response to the challenges faced by the nursing home sector at the start of the pandemic. As the pandemic continued, additional support measures for private and voluntary nursing homes have been delivered through the Health Service Executive (HSE).

As of 11th June 2021, 7,148 claims had been submitted as part of the Scheme. In total, €134.5 million has been made available under TAPS between 2020 and 2021.

Due to the ongoing high level of risk associated with COVID-19 during this period, the Department of Health responded by extending the scheme twice, far beyond the originally planned timescale of three months. The further extension of the scheme was outlined in the Government's Plan 'Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19', published in September 2020. This provided reassurance of the Scheme's availability and a planned timeframe of operation to the end of June 2021.

The cessation of TAPS at the end of June, as planned and previously announced was communicated with all relevant stakeholders, including Nursing Homes Ireland – the national representative body for the private and voluntary nursing home sector.

There has been a marked improvement in the status of the virus in the community and in nursing homes due to the rollout of the National Vaccination Programme – COVID-19 cases and outbreaks in nursing homes are now at a very low level compared with the first quarter of the year and, overall, the epidemiological situation is very positive. It is the Department's understanding that currently there is one open outbreak in a nursing home.

(Please note that the cyber-attack on the HSE on 14 May 2021 has prevented the routine

notification of cases, associated deaths and outbreaks of COVID-19 to the Computerised Infectious Disease Reporting (CIDR) system. As an interim measure, provisional epidemiological reports are being prepared but have not undergone the data validation procedures undertaken through CIDR. For this reason, data continues to be provisional at this time.)

The Scheme has fulfilled its temporary purpose of providing financial support to nursing homes to address COVID-19. Although the risk is greatly reduced, it has not been completely eliminated, therefore the outbreak assistance element of the Scheme will continue to be available to nursing homes until the end of 2021. Availability of outbreak assistance is subject to the overall sanctioned amount of €42m for 2021.

The substantial package of non-financial supports outlined below will continue to be provided for the time being:

- Provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). The continued supply of PPE is a key support mechanism and will be provided in line with clinical and public health recommendations;

- The COVID-19 Response Teams established to support Public Health Outbreak teams covering all residential services as well as home support settings. All stakeholders, including the COVID-19 Nursing Homes Expert Panel, have highlighted the significant contribution these new teams have made to supporting nursing homes throughout the pandemic;

- The HSE Temporary Accommodation Scheme;

- HSE training and development resources, including the opening up of HSeLanD to private and voluntary providers.

- IPC support and advice;

- The substantial suite of publicly available guidance developed to support the sector.

These measures and supports reflect a significant investment by the State to support nursing homes and other services and measures, such as the COVID-19 Response Teams, and are a clear signal of the work that is ongoing to integrate the wider health system.

It is also important to reflect that all nursing homes, as registered providers with HIQA, have well established obligations under the legal framework in terms of the delivery of safe care to residents. Nursing homes are required, by law, to ensure that procedures, consistent with the standards for the prevention and control of healthcare associated infections published by HIQA are implemented by staff. The current infection prevention and control standards have been in operation since 2018. Good and effective IPC procedures should be in place across the entire health and social care service as a matter of course.

In February 2021, a revised plan ‘Resilience and Recovery 2021 Plan: The Path Ahead’ was published by the Government. This plan recognises the need for longer-term reform of both older persons and nursing home care, broadly reflecting the lessons learned from the COVID-19 Nursing Homes Expert Panel and the pandemic. However, these structural reforms, including the policy and regulatory framework, extend beyond the scope of a temporary financial support scheme aimed at a specific, time-limited public health objective.

Vaccination Programme

449. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health the amount paid to general practitioners

in respect of the Covid-19 vaccination programme for 2021 to date. [33091/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Defibrillators Provision

450. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE will work with community groups to publicly identify the location of defibrillators around the country and to establish a publicly accessible list of defibrillator locations. [33099/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Disability Services

451. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Health the progress that has been made on the case of a child (details supplied) with complex needs who is having difficulties accessing respite care; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33100/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this Parliamentary Question relates to an operational issue, it is a matter for the HSE. However, members of the Oireachtas are advised that the HSE is currently unable to access the information to answer Parliamentary Questions due to the recent cyber-attack, which has required a temporary shut-down of HSE IT systems. The disruption to service is on-going, and the HSE is working hard to restore its IT capacity and resume normal services. Members of the Oireachtas will be advised as soon as the HSE is again in a position to provide responses to PQs and are encouraged to resubmit their Parliamentary Questions at that point.

Question No. 452 answered with Question No. 379.

State Bodies

453. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the recruitment process for leading positions in Safefood; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33137/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The recruitment process for all State Bodies is the responsibility of Commission for Public Service Appointments which has pub-

lished the Code of Practice for appointment to positions in the Civil Service and Public Service.

Under the British-Irish Agreement Act, 1999, it is up to the North/South Body, in this case Safefood, with the approval of North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) and the Finance Ministers, to determine the remuneration, grading, and numbers and other conditions of service of the CEO and other staff of the Body. This means Safefood must liaise with the Departments of Health, North and South, about any changes with regard to staffing. However, provided Safefood stay within the agreed remuneration levels, grading, and allocated staffing numbers there is no need to seek sanctions from parent departments.

The exception is with regard to the appointment of the CEO. Under the British-Irish Agreement Act, 1999, the appointment of the CEO must be approved by NSMC. The sponsor Departments, therefore, have to agree a selection process and liaise with their prospective Finance Departments and the NSMC to obtain prior approval to fill the position of CEO. Once the selection has been made, the appointment has to be approved by NSMC.

The British-Irish Agreement Act, 1999 provides for the Food Safety Promotion Board/Safefood to have both an Advisory Board and Advisory Committee.

Safefood selects the members of the Advisory Committee (SAC) based on a selection process. Positions on the SAC are publicly advertised. Safefood invites expressions of interest for the committee from suitably qualified professionals. Members are also selected in accordance with Safefood's Equality Policy. After conclusion of the selection process by Safefood, membership of the SAC is approved by Ministers (North and South) at the North South Ministerial Council.

Covid-19 Pandemic

454. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who have gone through mandatory hotel quarantine; the number of hotels used for mandatory hotel quarantine; the names and addresses of the hotels used for mandatory hotel quarantine; the number of persons accessing mandatory hotel quarantine from each port of origin, including Rosslare Port, Dublin Port, Port of Cork, Dublin Airport, Cork Airport, Shannon Airport and any other port offering international transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33168/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Mandatory hotel quarantine (MHQ) has been introduced as one element of Ireland's public health measures to combat the transmission of Covid-19 and to protect the population when there is a high risk of importation of infection from Covid-19 and from challenges posed by new variants of concern. As of 21st June a total of six hotels with the capacity of 1,376 rooms are in use for MHQ. The hotel quarantine facilities are:

- Crowne Plaza Airport Hotel, Santry
- Holiday Inn Express, Santry
- Red Cow Moran Hotel, Naas Road
- Radisson Blu Royal Hotel, Golden Lane
- Croke Park Hotel, Drumcondra
- Crowne Plaza Hotel Blanchardstown

The number of persons recorded for Mandatory Hotel Quarantine at each Port of Entry up to 11 July 2021 is as follows:

- Dublin Airport – 7,927
- Cork Airport – 68
- Shannon Airport – 0
- Dublin Sea Port – 103
- Rosslare Sea Port – 29
- Cork Sea Port - 0

Nursing Homes

455. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health if he will extend the remit of HIQA in order that it can investigate specific complaints regarding individual private nursing homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [33173/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) is an independent authority established to drive high-quality and safe care for people using our health and social care services in Ireland. HIQA's role is to develop standards, inspect and review health and social care services and support informed decisions on how services are delivered. HIQA's role includes monitoring the safety and quality of health services and investigating as necessary serious concerns about the health and welfare of people who use these services.

HIQA, is the statutory independent regulator in place for the nursing home sector, whether a HSE managed or a private nursing home. The Authority, established under the Health Act 2007, has significant and wide-ranging powers up to and including withdrawing the registration of a nursing home facility, which means that it can no longer operate as a service provider. This responsibility is underpinned by a comprehensive quality framework comprising of Registration Regulations, Care and Welfare Regulations and National Quality Standards.

HIQA does not investigate individual complaints, however the Department understands from HIQA that concerns it receives are used to inform its inspection and monitoring processes, informing the risk profile for the service and where appropriate are passed on to the relevant bodies.

In accordance with Regulation 34 of S.I. No. 415/2013 - Health Act 2007 (Care and Welfare of Residents in Designated Centres for Older People) Regulations 2013, registered providers of nursing home care are obliged to provide an accessible and effective complaints procedure. The registered provider is required to make each resident and their family aware of the complaints procedure as soon as is practicable following admission.

The Office of the Ombudsman can examine complaints about the actions of a range of public bodies including complaints relating to the administrative actions of private nursing homes. Regulatory bodies such as the Medical Council and the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland also has a role in the investigation of individual complaints. The appropriate pathway for making a complaint is dependent on the particular issue of concern.

The Department of Health is currently working on a policy and legislative framework to

provide a fit for purpose streamlined and consistent clinical complaints and patient safety incidents legislative scheme that meets the needs of patients and families across health services. This work will include legislation, regulation, and policy and will seek to incorporate a Programme for Government 2020 commitment to expand the remit of the Office of the Ombudsman to consider clinical decisions in health and social care complaints.

In August 2020, the Nursing Home Expert Panel (NHEP) report was published which contained 86 recommendations, across 15 thematic areas, many of which will require legislative measures to implement. HIQA also submitted a paper outlining a number of suggested amendments to the legislation governing the operation of designated centres for older people.

Having regard to the NHEP recommendations, learning from the pandemic and HIQA's suggested regulatory enhancements, the Minister for Health and I approved a two-phased approach to examining the legislation with a view to proposing enhancements to the primary and secondary legislation governing nursing homes, with a primary focus on enforcement, governance, oversight and certain regulatory areas including infection prevention and control. It is expected that, subject to Government approval draft Heads of Bill will be published by the end of the year.

Departmental Data

456. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of new food businesses registered with his Department between July 2020 and June 2021, by county; the number of same for the period July 2019 to June 2020, by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38770/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The table below contains the number of Meat and Milk FBO's currently registered with Milk & Meat Hygiene Division within the timeframes under query.

A number of new applications are submitted to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine each year from potential food business operators seeking registration and/or approval for dairy and meat products. Following the relevant inspections, successful applicants are issued with registration and/or approval certificates.

All FBOs must ensure that all stages of production, processing and distribution of food under their control satisfy the relevant hygiene and other requirements laid down in The Hygiene Package and S.I. No. 22 of 2020 which gives legal effect to the Hygiene Package Regulations.

	July 2020 – June 2021	July 2020 – June 2021	July 2019 – June 2020	July 2019 – June 2020
	Meat	Milk	Meat	Milk
Carlow				
Cavan				1
Clare		1		1
Cork		7		5
Donegal				
Dublin	2	1	1	
Galway				
Kerry		1		3

Kildare				
Kilkenny				
Laois		1		
Leitrim				
Limerick	1	3	1	
Longford				
Louth		2		
Mayo		1		1
Meath				
Monaghan				1
Offaly		1		
Roscommon				
Sligo				
Tipperary		1		3
Waterford				2
Westmeath				1
Wexford				
Wicklow				1

Departmental Correspondence

457. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department is in receipt of correspondence (details supplied); and if he will clarify the situation to the correspondent. [38839/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I understand from Department officials that this correspondence has been received and officials will contact the individual directly to provide the requested information and clarification.

Departmental Staff

458. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of staff by location and function in each office of his Department nationally by location; if the property is State owned or leased; and the detail of these leases in the case of those properties on a lease in terms of cost, term and next break date. [38862/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The information requested by the Deputy is provided in the files attached.

Generally speaking, all issues in relation to leases for premises for Government Departments/Offices, including the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine are a matter for the Office of Public Works (OPW). However, there are a limited number of locations where the Department leases premises.

[DAFM Locations]

[Staff by Location]

Aquaculture Industry

459. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of a salmon farm (details supplied) which had its licence discontinued in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38867/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The determination in April 2019 in respect of the matter referred to is currently the subject of ongoing legal proceedings and it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on the matter at this time.

Agriculture Schemes

460. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on increasing the ewe payment to €30 per animal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38868/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am very conscious of the important role that the sheep sector plays in the continued growth and development of our agri-food sector, and its valuable contribution to the rural economy.

The strong performance of the sector in 2020 has continued into 2021 and I am delighted that farmers are being rewarded from the market for their hard work. Reductions in production globally and increased demand are expected to support continued strong performance throughout 2021. The current average price is €6.17 per kg, which is 21% above the same period last year.

The Sheep Welfare Scheme was introduced in December 2016 as part of Ireland's Rural Development Programme, having been agreed with the European Commission. In the four years of the scheme to date, €66.9 million has been paid to 18,268 farmers. The Sheep Welfare scheme has been extended in 2021 as part of the transition arrangements prior to the next CAP.

There are currently no plans to increase the rate of payment under the Sheep Welfare Scheme.

I can assure the Deputy that I am committed to supporting the sustainable development of the sheep sector.

Forestry Sector

461. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the expected percentage of felling licence applicants screened in for appropriate assessment which will no longer require Natura impact statements following the issuing of circular 08/2021; the expected improvements in licensing output; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38883/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department has recently reviewed the systems for the preparation of Appropriate Assessment Screening Determinations, Appropriate Assessment Reports and Appropriate Assessment Determinations. Improvements have been made to the system to optimise the time of the ecologists to concentrate on the ecology aspects of each application. These improvements are outlined in Circular 8 of 2021.

Circular 8 of 2021 advises registered foresters to submit NISs when sought by the Department. In most cases, the Appropriate Assessment will be done by the Department without an applicant's NIS but with site information, project information and a detailed harvest plan. In some cases, a greater level of ecology input will be required from the applicant and this will be decided on a case by case basis by the Department's ecologists.

Using the system improvements and additional staff resources, June was the highest month for the issuing of private felling licences in over five years and included 226 private felling licences or an average rate of over 50 private felling licences a week. In total, the Department was issuing an average of 95 licences over the last seven weeks which was a 50% increase on previous weeks this year.

This will not be possible in July and early August because of the introduction of a consultation period of 30 days for cases that are undergoing Appropriate Assessment but output will increase again in September. Continued high output will also depend on receiving good quality harvest plans from applicants and their agents and good quality NIS's where sought along with Minister- of -State Pippa Hackett who has overall responsibility for the sector. I am committed to continuing to drive improvements in the sector.

Fishing Industry

462. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he plans to introduce a temporary tie-up scheme for fishing boats as part of the response to the changes brought about by Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38888/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In March 2021, I established a Seafood Sector Task Force to examine the negative impacts of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and the UK on Ireland's fishing fleet and on related coastal communities and to recommend mitigation measures to me that could be taken to provide supports for development and restructuring in order to ensure a profitable and sustainable fishing fleet and to identify opportunities for jobs and economic activity in coastal communities dependent on fishing.

On 9th June, I received an Interim Report of the Task Force, with the Final report due later this year. The Interim Report recommends the implementation, on a voluntary basis, of a temporary fleet tie-up scheme for certain segments of the fishing fleet, to mitigate the loss of income in 2021 for these fleets arising from the TCA quota reductions. Eligible vessels would be able to cease fishing for one calendar month only over the period September to December 2021 and receive compensation based on average monthly income in the pre-Covid, pre-Brexit years 2018/19, minus variable costs they will not incur while tied-up (fuel and food). The Interim Report recommends that this scheme be funded under the Brexit Adjustment Reserve. A State Aid approval from the European Commission is also required.

I welcome the recommendation of the Task Force on the proposed scheme and it is being considered as a matter of urgency.

Fishing Industry

463. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he plans to introduce a decommissioning scheme for fishing boats in view of the significant loss of quota by the Irish fishing fleet; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38889/21]

15 July 2021

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In March 2021, I established a Seafood Sector Task Force to examine the negative impacts of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the European Union and the UK on Ireland's fishing fleet and on related coastal communities and to recommend mitigation measures to me that could be taken to provide supports for development and restructuring in order to ensure a profitable and sustainable fishing fleet and to identify opportunities for jobs and economic activity in coastal communities dependent on fishing.

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The Final Report, due later this year, will include other Task Force proposals to support our fishing sector and our coastal communities that are dependent on fishing. Such proposals may include a recommendation to restructure our fishing fleet.

I await receipt of the Final Report and will give due consideration to any proposals made by the Task Force.

Horticulture Sector

464. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the measures he will introduce as a matter of urgency to ensure that there is an adequate supply of domestic peat for the mushroom and horticulture sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38911/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In relation to peat extraction, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has no involvement in its regulation. This is a planning process under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and an Integrated Pollution Control (IPC) license process, under the remit of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

Following the publication of the review of the use of Peat Moss in the Horticultural Industry report, I am aware that Minister of State Malcolm Noonan proposed the establishment of a working group to include representatives from relevant Government Departments and State Agencies, Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations and industry stakeholders under an independent chairperson to examine the issues identified during the review. In this respect, the working group are addressing the key issues raised in the report itself, including future use of peat by the horticulture sector. The independent working group sent an interim report to Minister Noonan at the end of May for his consideration. Minister Noonan and his officials are currently examining the report.

In addition to these developments, DAFM is actively looking at alternatives to peat and has funded two research projects to date. It has also recently sought further research be conducted here to explore alternatives to peat based growing media for horticultural production in this area in its latest Research Call for 2021. These must be available, affordable and sustainable and meet quality as well as environmental requirements.

DAFM also provides a support to the horticulture industry through the Scheme of Investment Aid for the Development of the Horticulture Sector. Financial support is available to assist growers and businesses through grant aid for capital investments in specialised plant and

equipment including renewable energy, as well as technology adoption specific to commercial horticulture production. A 50% budget increase to €9 million has been secured for 2021 reflecting the importance of the sector. This Scheme is 100% funded by the Irish Government.

In addition, the Department administers the EU Producer Organisation Scheme for Fruit and Vegetables which allows growers jointly market their production in order to strengthen the position of producers in the marketplace.

Horticulture Sector

465. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will ensure that the concerns of the mushroom and horticulture sector in relation to the harvesting of horticultural peat are addressed in view of the importance of peat for that sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38912/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In relation to peat extraction, the Department has no involvement in its regulation. This is a planning process under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and an Integrated Pollution Control (IPC) license process, under the remit of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

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In addition, the Department administers the EU Producer Organisation Scheme for Fruit and Vegetables which allows growers jointly market their production in order to strengthen the position of producers in the marketplace.

Food Industry

466. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine

the extent to which negotiations are taking place with or through the EU to address Brexit related issues in respect of Irish food exports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38943/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The EU – UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) came into effect on 1st January 2021. This created a new framework for the EU-UK trading relationship now that the UK is outside the Single Market and Customs Union.

Although some of the UK's import controls have been in place since 1st January, other requirements are coming into effect on a phased basis, with the next phase commencing on 1st October. The EU is engaging the UK bilaterally on these requirements. This is being augmented by regular engagement between the Department and the UK authorities across the range of additional requirements that Irish food exports will face from 1st October.

I would have preferred a more comprehensive arrangement in the TCA that included an SPS agreement that eased the process of moving agri-food goods between the EU and the UK. However, the UK was not prepared to commit to the extent of regulatory alignment with EU rules that would have been required in order to facilitate such an SPS agreement.

Discussions with the UK are also underway in accordance with the provisions of the TCA. The overarching body that will monitor the agreement and ensure its implementation is the Partnership Council. This will be supported by a number of committees and working groups, including the Trade Specialised Committee on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures.

Effective implementation of the TCA is a priority, and I welcomed the first meeting of the Partnership Council of the TCA in June of this year. Further meetings of the Committees under the TCA will be held over the coming months, including on Fisheries, which is expected to take place on 20th July. The SPS Committee is expected to be held later in the year, around September or October.

The EU and UK will be represented on these Committees, and Member States, including Ireland, will participate in meetings as part of the EU delegation. As part of this process, the Department is engaging closely with our EU partners to ensure that our key interests are protected and advanced.

Brexit Issues

467. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps being taken to ensure that the Northern Ireland Protocol is not used as a means to selectively target Irish food exports to the UK or elsewhere; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38944/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Ireland – Northern Ireland Protocol provides a legally operative solution that avoids a hard border on the island of Ireland, protects the all-island economy and the Good Friday Agreement, and safeguards the integrity of the EU Single Market.

To achieve this, Northern Ireland will continue to apply the European Union's Customs Code and will remain aligned to all EU legislation listed in Annex 2 of the Protocol, including the SPS rules of the Single Market. As a result, there are no new SPS checks between Ireland and Northern Ireland.

However, goods originating in Northern Ireland are of UK origin from a customs perspective. This means that Irish agri-food products containing inputs from Northern Ireland may not be able to avail of preferential tariff rates provided for in EU Free Trade Agreements with third countries. This specific issue essentially does not arise for exports to countries where no FTA exists, or for Irish food exports to the EU or the UK.

The Commission has been clear that existing FTAs cannot be renegotiated to account for Brexit. Future FTAs could have different rules of origin so as to prevent this issue arising, where strong economic justification can be made.

It's important to be clear that this is not a case of the Protocol being used to selectively target Irish food exports. This issue would have arisen regardless of whether the Protocol was agreed or not and is a consequence of the UK's departure from the EU.

Brexit Issues

468. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the degree to which he and his Department are engaged in addressing Brexit related issues likely to impact on Irish food exports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38945/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The UK is now operating outside the EU Single Market and Customs Union, and we are trading with the UK (excluding Northern Ireland) as we do with other non-EU countries.

The UK Government sets its own import policy, and is introducing new controls on imports from the EU on a phased basis. From 1st October 2021, export health certificates will be required to accompany products of animal origin to Great Britain, and pre-notification to the UK authorities will be necessary. Seamless trade with Great Britain is no longer possible, and impacts such as delays, additional costs and, potentially, adjustments to supply chains, are unavoidable.

To mitigate these impacts, the Department is progressing a range of activities to support Irish businesses exporting to GB. The Department has invested significantly in developing our IT systems to process documentation post-Brexit, and to putting the necessary staffing resources in place to support this work. Export health certification will be provided through the Department's existing IT systems - systems that have been specifically developed for Brexit - and through the EU Trade Control And Expert System (TRACES).

Ongoing consultation and communications are also taking place with the industry, including logistics companies, in order to enhance its readiness. Trials are ongoing across a range of commodities with industry partners, and additional trials are planned throughout the summer. Learnings are being shared through case studies, webinars and direct engagement.

The Department also continues to engage regularly with the UK's Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, including at senior official level, to press for decisions on outstanding issues, including pre-notification periods and details to be pre-notified, certification queries, requirements for products transiting the landbridge, and Border Control Post infrastructure and procedures in British ports.

Food Safety

469. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine

if the rules governing food imports into the EU perform to the highest standards in husbandry, production and traceability; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38946/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The import of products of animal origin from third countries is governed by a comprehensive and robust legislative framework laid down at EU level, controlled by Member States in the first instance, and audited by the European Commission's Directorate General for Health and Food Safety to ensure compliance with all of the relevant food safety standards. The legislation imposes health and supervisory requirements designed to ensure that imported products meet standards equivalent to those required for production and trade between Member States.

Veterinary checks are carried out by staff from the Department on consignments of foods of animal origin imported from third countries at designated Border Control Posts. All such consignments are subject to checks which include a range of documentary, identity checks and physical checks. This includes that sampling of products are carried out according to European regulations. Import control procedures on products of animal and fish origin are highly prescriptive and are strictly audited by the Directorate to ensure compliance. Inspection finding reports are published on the Directorate General for Health and Food Safety's website.

This comprehensive and robust legislative framework and the checks carried out by the relevant competent authorities across EU member states ensure that imports meet the requisite standards.

Food Industry

470. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which he and his Department continue to ensure the sustainable development of the food industry here, notwithstanding Brexit-related issues; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38947/21]

471. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which he continues to liaise with his Government colleagues in order to ensure the sustainable and viable development of the agri-food sector and the fundamental importance of same and the need to reduce carbon emissions; if he remains satisfied that both objectives can be achieved without damaging the other; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38948/21]

473. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to ensure the future of the agri-food sector here on a sustainable basis given the high level of sustainability already achieved by the sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38950/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 470, 471 and 473 together.

The agri-food sector has benefited from an approach to strategic planning through the development of 10-year stakeholder-led strategies, updated every five years. Since their inception 20 years ago, up to the current Food Wise 2025 plan, these strategies have ensured that the sector has a coherent vision and strategy to underpin the sector's continued development. The development of a new strategy for the agri-food sector is a key commitment of the Programme for Government, which called for an ambitious blueprint for the sector for the years ahead, adding value sustainably into the future, with a strategic focus on environmental protection.

The need to improve sustainability in all its forms, environmental, economic and social, has been at the core of the deliberations of the Stakeholder Committee established to develop the new Strategy. A draft of this Strategy was published in April as part of a public consultation and it sets a vision for Ireland to become a world leader in Sustainable Food Systems over the period to 2030. This vision will see Ireland's agri-food sector continuing to produce safe, nutritious, high-value food while protecting and enhancing our environment and contributing to vibrant rural and coastal communities and the national economy.

It is clear from the draft Strategy that careful consideration has been given to the issue of meeting environmental targets, while also supporting the ongoing development and viability of the agri-food sector. The draft Strategy has established four high level Missions and these in effect will guide the sector to achieving the triple objectives of economic, environmental and social sustainability:

- A Climate Smart, Environmentally Sustainable Agri-Food Sector.
- Viable and Resilient Primary Producers, with Enhanced Wellbeing
- Food that is Safe, Nutritious and Appealing, Trusted and Valued at Home and Abroad.
- And An Innovative, Competitive and Resilient Sector, Driven by Technology and Talent.

It is also worth noting that the draft Strategy has set challenging environmental metrics for the sector to achieve, including the over-arching ambition to develop a climate neutral sector by 2050, with substantial verifiable progress by 2030. I note that a series of well-thought out actions are contained in the Strategy to help deliver on that ambition. These build on the Ag Climatise Climate & Air Roadmap for the Agriculture Sector that I launched in December last.

I am confident that the new Strategy will serve the sector well and that its vision can be achieved, notwithstanding the challenges that exist in terms of sustainability, dealing with the aftermath of Brexit and building back better after COVID-19. Working together we will become a world leader in Sustainable Food Systems over the period to 2030.

Question No. 471 answered with Question No. 470.

Agriculture Industry

472. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the total production in the dairy sector here in each of the past five years to date; the degree to which action has been taken to minimise greenhouse gases associated with the sector in the same period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38949/21]

474. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which beef production has fluctuated in each of the past five years to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38951/21]

475. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which the poultry production sector here continues to maintain production and sustainability throughout the poultry sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38952/21]

477. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which sustainable production levels continue to be maintained in the beef, dairy, poultry, pig meat and lamb sectors; the potential for growth in the future; the extent to which

measures continue to be taken to limit the growth of greenhouse gases; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38956/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 472, 474, 475 and 477 together.

I am very aware of the contribution of the meat and dairy sectors to Irish agri-food as a whole, supporting significant levels of direct employment as well as their role in supporting rural economies and the wider national economy. The Department and I continue to prioritise supporting the sustainable development of these sectors including through targeted supports aimed at supporting primary producers to increase the environmental and economic efficiency of their operations.

Despite a challenging macro environment which presented ongoing market disturbances through 2020, Ireland exported dairy products to 143 countries with a value exceeding €5.1 billion. CSO figures for 2020 indicate a -0.7% volume decline and a 0.4% value increase compared to the same period in 2019. Irish milk production reached 8.2 billion litres in 2020 which represented approximately 5% of total EU milk production. The average price paid to farmers in 2020 was 35.43c/l (yearly average including VAT and bonuses paid), up 4.5% from 2019.

The table below shows the number of litres produced, the value of dairy exports (in €billion) and the number of dairy cows over the last six years.

Year	Number of litres (billion)	Value of dairy exports (€bn)	Number of dairy cow, 000
			June CSO survey
2014	5.651	3.0	1,226.4
2015	6,395	3.9	1,295.8
2016	6,653	4.0	1,397.9
2017	7,262	4.7	1,432.7
2018	7,588	4.7	1,480.9
2019	7.986	5.0	1,504.8
2020	8.291	5.1	1,567.7

The use of technologies such as the economic breeding index, genomics in breeding decisions and milk recording, as well as efficiencies in pasture and manure management are all important tools currently used in the management of greenhouse gas emissions in dairy production.

Over the five years from 2016 - 2020, annual beef production averaged 1.73 million head with a coefficient of variation of 0.03 during that period indicating very stable production levels. Beef worth over €2.3 billion and just short of 518,000 tonnes was exported in 2020, this represented a decrease in both value and volume of 2% on the previous year. Slaughter reached almost 1.8 million head in 2020 which was a 2.6% increase on 2019 figures. The average price for R3 Steers in 2020 was 362.73c/kg (excl VAT), which represented a 1% increase on the previous year.

Sheepmeat export values increased by 11.5% on the previous year values to reach almost €354 million, while volumes rose by 3% to almost 64,000 tonnes. Slaughtering increased by 3% in 2020 to just under 2.9 million head. The national average price in 2020 was €519.92/100Kg, a 13% increase on the previous year.

Pigmeat exports increased by 0.21% in value terms on 2019, totalling just over €893 mil-

lion. Over the past two years the value of pigmeat exports have grown by 7.9%. The average price for 2020 was 2.9% higher than 2019.

Irish poultry production hit record levels in 2020, with a total of 111m birds slaughtered, representing an increase of 33.8% (just over 28 million birds) in the past five-year period.

The OECD long term forecast to 2030 predicts an increase in the consumption of poultry meat over the forecast period, but a reduction in beef consumption and a stabilization of the consumption of other meats. While EU consumption is projected to continue this downward trajectory, international demand for beef is increasing. However, competition is high and EU beef prices are expected to follow world price developments. The EU long term outlook for dairy is positive and it is predicted that by 2030, the EU could command up to 35% of the global market share, particularly for value added products. However, remaining global risks include higher stocks, slow return of foodservice, and the impact of weaker economic growth on currency and buying power.

Global trade conditions will be crucial in determining the outlook for the Irish meat and dairy sectors over the medium to longer term. While the outlook for the sector remains broadly positive, the sector continues to face challenges including the ongoing uncertainty resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. Ensuring the continued operation of Irish food supply chains and the pursuit and development of new markets remains a key priority for my Department.

The need to respond to evolving consumer expectations on welfare and sustainability as well as global demand are key to the continued sustainable development of the sector. The transition to become carbon neutral by 2050 is going to require significant investment, innovation and R&D. For this reason, I am heartened to see that these are also at the core of the draft 2030 Strategy. It is also worth noting that support will be available in the new Common Agricultural Policy which has a significantly increased environmental ambition. This will involve a change in the way farmers receive support, with the emphasis shifting much more definitively to a focus on better environmental outcomes, delivered through the green architecture. This green architecture combines greater environmental and climate ambition with Pillar 1 payments with further environmental achievement through Pillar 2 schemes.

All of the evidence suggests that the long term fundamentals for dairy and meat are generally positive. The Department and I will continue to monitor the sectors closely and support their ongoing sustainable development.

Question No. 473 answered with Question No. 470.

Question No. 474 answered with Question No. 472.

Question No. 475 answered with Question No. 472.

Pigmeat Sector

476. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which new regulations are being imposed on the pig production sector given that new regulations have only been introduced in the past number of years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38953/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): No changes to the regulations in relation to pig husbandry or welfare have been introduced in recent years; the current law dates back to 2008 (Council Directive 2008/120/EC). This Directive

was transposed into Irish law and has remained unchanged since then (SIs 71 of 2009 and 311 of 2010).

The European Commission has drawn attention to the urgent need for compliance by the intensive pig industry with this Directive to improve significantly. This has been communicated clearly by way of a letter from Commissioner Kyriakides to my predecessor in May 2020, and in the findings and recommendations of a recent European Commission audit which took place in November 2020 (2020-6961 Animal welfare reporting - final report.pdf).

In light of this urgency, and taking into account significant evolution in the evidence base around animal welfare as well as market and consumer demands, national regulation concerning pig husbandry and welfare is under review by the Department.

A legislative proposal is likely to be tabled later this year, and this will be done in full consultation with all relevant stakeholders.

Question No. 477 answered with Question No. 472.

Agriculture Industry

478. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the degree to which his Department continues to examine ways and means of carbon sequestration in line with requirements while maintaining the viability of the agri-food sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38957/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department is aware of the significant contribution that on-farm carbon sequestration, particularly through our soils and hedgerows, can make in the continued viability and sustainability of the agri-food sector.

Recent initiatives supported through funding from the Department will provide much needed data on the emission profile of our farms and will inform policy decisions in this area to better support farmers in their efforts to sequester, store and protect carbon through better management decisions.

In particular, the establishment of the National Agricultural Soil Carbon Observatory with supporting technology for the measurement of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from a range of different soil and farm types will place Ireland at the forefront of EU carbon sequestration research. This infrastructure will be located on a number of Teagasc Signpost farms which is a new initiative which aims to support our farmers by acting as a demonstration and research resource for best practice on our farms.

Teagasc has also recently commenced a research project called “Farm-Carbon – Farm Hedgerows and Non-forest Woodland Carbon”. This project will provide a deeper understanding of hedgerows and non-forest woodland as carbon stocks in agricultural landscapes and will allow researchers to identify approaches to maintain and enhance this contribution.

As you will appreciate, the knowledge gained from the aforementioned research and technological infrastructure establishment activities pursued through this Department will not only demonstrate the continued viability of our agri-food sector but it will also allow for the refinement of our reporting to the National Inventory further emphasising the sustainability of the agricultural sector.

Food Industry

479. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which the strict rules in relation to food production and traceability continue to apply in jurisdictions from which Ireland imports or exports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38958/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The import of products of animal origin from third countries is governed by a comprehensive and robust legislative framework laid down at EU level, controlled by Member States in the first instance, and audited by the European Commission's Directorate General for Health and Food Safety to ensure compliance with all of the relevant food safety standards. Countries and indeed establishments within third countries that export to the EU must in the first instance be listed by the EU, as meeting the appropriate standards and controls. The legislation imposes health and supervisory requirements designed to ensure that imported products meet standards equivalent to those required for production and trade between Member States. Production in EU member states is carried out in accordance with EU law and subject to oversight audit by the EU Commission.

Veterinary checks are carried out by staff from the Department on consignments of foods of animal origin imported from third countries at designated Border Control Posts. All such consignments are subject to documentary, identity and physical checks as appropriate in line with legislative requirements. This may also include sampling of products, according to European regulations.

This comprehensive and robust legislative framework and the checks carried out by the relevant competent authorities across EU member states ensure that imports meet the requisite standards.

Food Industry

480. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of new markets identified for Irish food and food products in the wake of Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38959/21]

481. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the degree to which alternative third-country markets are being established for Irish agricultural produce given the impact of Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38960/21]

482. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans for the establishment of new markets for dairy, beef and pigmeat in the wake of Brexit with particular reference to addressing the issues of greatest or most pressing need at the earliest possible date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38961/21]

483. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the extent to which his Department has identified new EU or non-EU markets for Irish quality product in the dairy, beef and or pigmeat sectors with a view to ensuring sustainability and viability in the future for family farms; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [38962/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 480 to 483, inclusive, together.

Developing increased trade opportunities continues to be an integral part of the Depart-

ment'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. Encouragingly, and despite an extremely challenging year in 2020, exports totalled €14.1 billion compared with exports of €12.6 billion in 2016, the year the UK voted to leave the EU. In 2020, 37% of agri-food exports went to the UK, which was down from 40% in 2016. Remaining agri-food exports in 2020 were split between the EU-27 market (31%) and other third country markets (32%).

The Department continues to be very active in the development of EU and 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.

Recent budgets have provided additional funding to Bord Bia to support increased market diversification and promotional campaigns. Bord Bia continues to assist companies to establish a presence overseas through its network of offices and the Department's expanded network of agriculture attachés actively supports Bord Bia and exporters in this regard.

Question No. 481 answered with Question No. 480.

Question No. 482 answered with Question No. 480.

Question No. 483 answered with Question No. 480.

Agriculture Industry

484. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a response will issue in relation to queries raised by an organisation (details supplied) in respect of the treatment of potato crops; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [39053/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The queries referred to, concerning the treatment of potato crops, are currently being considered. A response to the queries will be issued shortly.

The Department recognises that there are challenges for the potato industry and that, in particular, there are challenges relating to procedures for the effective desiccation of crops. A number of actions have been taken to support growers. These actions include support for haulm toppers under the Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme and wide-ranging engagement by Teagasc to provide growers with detailed information on how best to manage crops.

Teagasc will continue their research and advisory work in this area and will continue to work closely with industry representatives and with growers.

Departmental Data

485. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the number of staff by location and function in each office of her Department nationally by location; if the property is State owned or leased; and the detail of these leases in the case of those properties on a lease in terms of cost, term and next break date. [38849/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department was established in July 2017 and currently occupies office space at two locations - Trinity Point, Dublin 2, and Government Buildings, Ballina, Co. Mayo. The offices occupied in Ballina are in the ownership of the Office of Public Works (OPW), while the lease arrangements in relation to Trinity Point are managed on our behalf by the OPW. In both cases, no costs are directly incurred by my Department.

Both the Dublin and Mayo offices contain staff working for both the Rural and Community Development functions of the department. Both locations also contain staff who work within the Corporate and Strategic Development function of the Department.

My department also has responsibility for the Islands, whereby staff are based in an office in Na Forbatha, Galway whereby the lease or ownership of the office is a matter for the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. DRCD also has 7 regional staff who have no fixed location.

The number of staff in each location as of the 12th July 2021 is outlined below:

Location	Number of Staff
Trinity Point, Dublin 2	80
Government Buildings, Ballina, Co. Mayo	76
Regional Staff	7
Islands Staff	9

Rural Schemes

486. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the funding allocated to date through the various schemes controlled by her Department by county; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38963/21]

487. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the funding allocated to date through the various schemes controlled by her Department in County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38964/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 486 and 487 together.

My Department was established in 2017 and funds a range of programmes and schemes to assist in rural and community development which are available to eligible community groups and organisations throughout the country.

My Department was allocated €341 million in the 2021 Revised Estimates, this ensures that we are in a position to further assist communities seeking funding and other supports for important local activities and projects.

The amount allocated by my Department for urban and rural development and renewal purposes in the past three years to-date is, €133 million in 2017, €251 million in 2018, €315 million in 2019, €314 million in 2020, and €209 million to date in 2021.

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Kildare was allocated, €2.9 million in 2017, €4.2 million in 2018, €10.9 million in 2019, €7.6 million in 2020 and €2.2 million to date in 2021.

This funding includes the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP), the Community Services Programme, the CLÁR Programme, the Community Enhancement Programme, the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund and funding for public libraries across the country.

Details of funding allocations under specific schemes provided by my Department are available online at www.gov.ie/en/organisation/department-of-rural-and-community-development/

My Department is also responsible for a number of national policies that provide, for both urban and rural areas nationwide, an integrated and strategic way of delivering supports, programmes and schemes, coordinating measures to address imbalances or lack of opportunity, making a real difference to people's lives. These include the National Policy on Social Enterprise, and the Strategy to Support the Community & Voluntary Sector in Ireland.

The new national rural development policy Our Rural Future, which I launched in March, sets out a blueprint for the development of rural Ireland over the next five years. The policy is supported by 150 commitments across Government, which will address the challenges facing communities and deliver new opportunities for people living in rural areas.

Delivery of the measures contained in the policy will help rural Ireland to recover from the impacts of COVID-19, enable long-term development of rural areas, and create more resilient rural economies and communities for the future. The policy highlights the interdependence of rural and urban areas, and the integral role of rural Ireland in contributing to balanced regional development in terms of jobs and investment.

The policy will be underpinned by investment across Government in areas such as the roll out of high-speed broadband, remote working facilities, job creation, town centre regeneration, community development, improvements in regional and local roads, new cycling and walking infrastructure, expanded rural transport services, funding for tourism, culture and heritage projects, and a just transition to a climate-neutral society.

Ongoing dialogue over the course of the five year policy timeframe will ensure that rural communities are at the heart of designing and delivering responses that meet local needs.

I am confident that the funding supports and policies provided by my Department are delivering, and will continue to deliver, tangible benefits for both urban and rural communities, supporting economic development, and enabling the local and community development sectors to continue to provide valuable much needed services and supports to all communities throughout the country.

Question No. 487 answered with Question No. 486.

Departmental Schemes

488. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the degree to which her Department continues to target urban or rural deprivation by way of specifically designed assistance in financial terms; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38965/21]

491. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Develop-

ment the number of projects throughout the country in urban or rural areas currently in place through her Department aimed at addressing issues of social or economic disadvantage; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38968/21]

492. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the degree to which she and her Department continue to liaise with urban and rural communities with a view to identifying the most appropriate means of offering support to meet their specific concerns particularly in the aftermath of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38969/21]

493. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the success to date of the various initiatives introduced by her Department to address issues of social or economic deprivation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38970/21]

494. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development her medium to long-term objectives to ensure that economic progress is spread evenly throughout the country in a sustainable way; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38971/21]

495. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the extent to which her Department continues to be in contact with urban or rural based groups seeking to improve opportunities for employment and social development within the communities; the success of such schemes to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38972/21]

504. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the number of persons in urban and rural areas likely to benefit from initiatives taken by her and her Department through the aegis of the various schemes in place; if any new schemes or extension to existing schemes are proposed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38982/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 488, 491 to 495, inclusive, and 504 together.

My Department delivers a wide range of policies and measures to support urban and rural communities. All policy is underpinned by broad consultation with a wide range of stakeholders including rural and urban stakeholder groups, young people and the wider public, Government Departments and State Agencies. This engagement process provides important insights into issues impacting on rural and urban communities and in identifying areas for response relevant to the work of my Department.

My Department introduced specific supports, interventions and funding packages, having assessed the emerging needs of urban and rural communities impacted by COVID-19. A range of COVID-19 related supports were introduced to support the response and recovery from the pandemic in 2020 including; COVID-19 Stability Fund; Broadened Community Enhancement Programme; Town & Village Renewal – Accelerated Measure; Philanthropy Fund ‘Innovate Together’; Broadened CLÁR Programme; Comic Relief match funding; Libraries Development- Small Scale Capital Works Programme; Community Services Programme (CSP) Support Fund; Social Enterprise Funding; Volunteer Support Programme and the COVID-19 Emergency Fund.

My Department continues to provide COVID-19 supports to communities right across the country. On 6th May I launched the 2021 Stability Fund, with an allocation of €10m, targeting organisations which deliver critical services to vulnerable people within their community but

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which now face closure or loss of service due to the impact of the pandemic. This €10 million investment builds on the €45 million Stability Fund 2020, which supported almost 600 organisations across the country.

The application process for the 2021 Stability Fund has now closed, with applications appraised and assessed in batches to facilitate timely drawdowns. Decisions will be released on an ongoing basis. I was pleased to announce Tranche One of successful grantees under the 2021 Stability Fund on 9th July 2021, supporting 180 organisations with close to €4.5m in allocations. Further tranches will follow in due course.

The recently launched €4.5 million 2021 Community Enhancement Programme (CEP) 2021 will also support local groups to re-open their facilities post COVID-19. The application window is open, groups should contact their LCDC for information on making applications.

The COVID-19 pandemic has put a spotlight on the invaluable role played by Social Enterprises in their communities. Across Ireland throughout this pandemic Social Enterprises have made an important contribution in areas such as mental health, social inclusion and the circular economy.

In February, I announced a €800,000 call for proposals from Local Development Companies to provide supports to assist Social Enterprises in their recovery from COVID-19. Given the high level of interest and quality of the applications, on 8 July I increased this allocation to €945,000.

The programme, which is funded through my Department's Dormant Accounts Fund, will provide free training and mentoring to social enterprise managers, directors and staff across the country. It is estimated that over 550 social enterprises will benefit from these supports over the next year, which will build their capacity in areas such as strategic planning, digital innovation, capacity building and governance.

The COVID-19 Social Enterprise Regeneration Programme builds on successful schemes for Social Enterprises funded by my Department in recent years, such as the Training and Mentoring Scheme and the Small Capital Grants Scheme for Social Enterprises. This announcement underscores my commitment to supporting Social Enterprises and to delivering the National Social Enterprise Policy 2019-2022 which was published by my Department in 2019 and is part of a suite of policy initiatives from the Department of Rural and Community Development to support those who work with communities and disadvantaged groups.

The programme will be delivered by the Local Development Companies on a regional basis and will be managed on the Department's behalf by the Irish Local Development Network (ILDN). The regional rollout of the scheme contributes positively to the commitment under Our Rural Future to deliver a suite of new measures to support the development of Social Enterprises in rural and to contribute to job creation locally.

Other supports provided by my Department for communities impacted by COVID include:

- €50 million 2020 support package for the Community and Voluntary Sector, Charities and Social Enterprises launched by Government and administered by my Department. This funding was made available from the Dormant Accounts Fund through the COVID-19 Stability Fund and the Innovate Together Fund.

- €4.2 million for 2 rounds of the 2020 COVID-19 Emergency Fund which was focused on groups participating in the Government's "Community Call" initiative.

- €7 million was provided in funding for the Community Enhancement Programme in 2020.

This comprised of €2 million in June and a further €5 million in August under the Government July Stimulus package.

- €4.75m Community Services Programme, or CSP, 2020 additional support fund, developed by my Department in response to the difficulties being experienced by organisations due to COVID-19, to continue to retain their CSP supported employees on their payroll, regardless of whether the organisations are in a position to continue to provide normal activities or whether they have had to close their facilities/services as a result of the COVID restrictions. The programme currently supports over 420 community organisations under the Community Services Programme, or CSP, to provide local services through a social enterprise model, in both urban and rural communities. Our 2020 allocation is €46.89m and we achieved full spend in 2020. We have an additional €2m for 2021. Some €49m is available to support community organisations under the programme in 2021.

- €25 million under the 2020 Town and Village Renewal Scheme focused on interventions to support the economic and social recovery of our rural towns and villages and assist them in responding to the challenges presented by COVID-19.

- My Department worked with Pobal to put in place guidelines for the community and voluntary sector for reopening or operating their premises safely, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- My Department worked to support the Community Call initiative which was an unprecedented mobilisation of both state and voluntary resources to combat the effects of COVID-19. This included providing funding for a COVID-19 Community Outreach initiative implemented by the Wheel and Irish Rural link, which supported the voluntary sector.

- My Department provided flexibility under the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP 2020, €39.1 million) to allow Local Development Companies work to support initiatives put in place to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Groups or organisations qualify for support schemes or programmes provided by my Department where they meet the requisite eligibility criteria. Some examples of key supports, interventions and funding provided by my Department for communities throughout the country are as follows:

- €6.5 million funding towards the regeneration of Dublin's North East Inner City (NEIC) support in 2020, and the same amount will be available in 2021.

- €340,000 under the CLÁR 2020 programme through the addition of a new funding measure - Meals on Wheels and Linked Services which placed a particular focus on supporting CLÁR communities to deal with the impact of COVID-19 in their areas.

- €5.8 million in funding was approved under CLÁR 2020 for 186 projects. The CLÁR 2021 budget is increased by 10% to €5.5 million.

- €1.3 million support for voluntary organisations who provide transport for service users in rural areas under the 2020 Mobility and Cancer Care Measure.

- I have secured an additional €2 million in Budget 2021 as part of the expanded Town and Village Renewal Scheme.

- €20 million, initial allocation in December 2020 for Transitional LEADER Programme which will come into effect from 1st. April 2021. A key focus of the Transitional Programme will be on building capacity within communities which have not received LEADER funding

to date. The programme will also support job creation, foster and encourage entrepreneurship, and support projects which address the climate agenda, digital transformation and the Smart Villages approach to building on local strengths and assets. Under the Transitional Programme, the grant rate for enterprises and commercially-focused community projects will be increased from a maximum of 50% to a maximum of 75%. This will further help to support enterprise development and job creation in rural areas in a post COVID and Brexit environment.

- Since the establishment of the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, 164 projects have been approved for funding of €249 million for projects costing €328 million.

- The projects approved for funding are large scale, ambitious projects that have the potential to allow rural communities to transform and reshape their towns and villages and position them to take advantage of the opportunities arising from the pandemic in terms of remote working and of people returning to rural areas to live and work.

- I announced the third call for Category 2 applications to the Fund on 12th May with a closing date of 30th July. I am seeking large scale projects that will drive economic growth, combat dereliction and breathe new life into town centres.

- The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme, or SICAP, is our country's primary social inclusion intervention. It is a national programme delivered with funding of €190 million over a five-year period from 2018 to 2022. The work in each area differs to support local structures and needs rather than imposing general solutions. It will include work to combat isolation experienced by disadvantaged individuals. SICAP supports a range of groups in society which are disadvantaged and marginalised.

- My Department provides support to Local Authorities towards the cost of additional staff to support the community function in Local Authorities. These are key posts which continue to support the coordinated Local Community Development Committee arrangements and the implementation of Local Economic and Community Plans in particular monitoring the emerging needs of urban and rural communities throughout the country with a view to responding specifically as required.

In addition my Department has published a number of important policies which will bring tangible benefits to communities throughout the country, including:

- The recently launched Our Rural Future, a new whole-of-Government Rural Development Policy for the next five years, which sets out a range of measures to strengthen the resilience of our rural communities and economies, including addressing the impacts of challenges experienced by people living and working in rural Ireland and maximising opportunities for rural areas.

- The development of the National Volunteering Strategy provided an opportunity to engage with the sector and the establishment of a National Advisory Group representative of all stakeholders and chaired by the Minister of State, including engagement with our young people through a consultation event with Foróige. €5.1m is allocated in 2021 to provide support to Volunteer Centres, Volunteering Organisation and to assist with the implementation of the new National Volunteering Strategy 2021-2025. Supporting the role of volunteers in our society is an important element of my Department's work.

Ongoing dialogue is maintained by my Department with rural and urban stakeholders, in order to identify and respond to issues impacting on individuals and communities. I will also continue to collaborate with my Government colleagues and will monitor the issues which impact our urban and rural communities in order to respond to emerging needs.

Digital Hubs

489. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the extent to which her Department has progressed the concept of digital hubs in order to minimise long commutes to work while at the same time replicating a work place environment both from the point of view of the employer and employee; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38966/21]

490. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the number of digital hubs envisaged by her Department throughout the country with a view to enabling persons to remain in their own communities while in a work place environment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38967/21]

499. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the number of persons currently benefitting from the use of urban or rural digital hubs; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38976/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 489 to 499, inclusive, together.

The increased shift to remote working as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic has given us the opportunity for a greater regional distribution of jobs and to support a better quality of life for many people who previously spent many hours in long commutes. This is a key focus of the Government's new rural development policy Our Rural Future.

Remote working, supported by appropriate infrastructure and facilities, has the potential to encourage more people to live in rural areas while working in good quality jobs, no matter where their employer is based. It can also help revitalise our rural towns if remote working hubs are developed in their centres.

The National Hub Network expanded from a €1m scheme that was funded under the 2019 Dormant Accounts Fund Action Plan. This project was originally scoped to develop a hub network, supported by a shared online platform for remote working facilities in the Atlantic Economic Corridor. However, in light of the clear demand for such a network across the county, this was expanded to a national project that would support both Our Rural Future and the National Remote Working strategy.

I launched the National Hub Network, connectedhubs.ie, on 31 May in the Swinford Digiwest Hub in Co. Mayo. Since the launch, 113 hubs have signed on and are now using the platform, with an additional 49 hubs in the process of being onboarded. Furthermore, the number of hubs identified through the Western Development Commission's hub discovery process has increased to 505. These are in the process of being verified before they are mapped on connectedhubs.ie/nationalhubsmap.html. This interactive map provides useful information in relation to each of the hubs and the services that are available at each site.

My Department does not record definitive figures of the number of people currently using the facilities across the range of hubs at this time. Due to current public health restrictions, some hubs are catering for essential workers only and many have not fully reopened. In all, there are approximately 15,000 desk spaces across the hubs nationally that can be utilised.

The National Hub Network and connectedhubs.ie platform will play an important role in allowing us to develop datasets, including usage datasets, which in turn will help to inform future policy and investment decisions.

This represents significant progress and demonstrates the value of the network. I am confident that the ambitious targets that I set for the development of the network will be exceeded by year end.

Question No. 490 answered with Question No. 489.

Question No. 491 answered with Question No. 488.

Question No. 492 answered with Question No. 488.

Question No. 493 answered with Question No. 488.

Question No. 494 answered with Question No. 488.

Question No. 495 answered with Question No. 488.

Departmental Schemes

496. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the expenditure to date under the town and village renewal scheme by county; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38973/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Town & Village Renewal Scheme is designed to assist with the rejuvenation of rural towns and villages throughout Ireland, making them more attractive places to live, work, and socialise.

The Scheme has supported or is currently supporting 1,340 projects in towns and villages the length and breadth of rural Ireland. Grant funding is released at various stages as the project progresses, with the final funding being released on completion. Projects funded under the scheme typically take between 12 to 18 months to complete, although flexibility is provided on timelines where that is required to facilitate project delivery.

I have set out in the following table the level of expenditure under the Scheme on a county basis up to 9 July 2021.

County	TVRS expenditure to 9 July 2021
Carlow	€2,163,319
Cavan	€2,434,207
Clare	€2,288,747
Cork	€3,281,148
Donegal	€2,233,718
Dublin	€1,309,984
Galway	€2,635,434
Kerry	€1,827,510
Kildare	€1,362,898
Kilkenny	€1,946,703
Laois	€2,601,948
Leitrim	€2,417,333
Limerick	€2,626,022
Longford	€1,833,951
Louth	€2,125,891

County	TVRS expenditure to 9 July 2021
Mayo	€3,038,072
Meath	€2,261,915
Monaghan	€2,164,793
Offaly	€2,551,302
Roscommon	€2,206,054
Sligo	€3,110,973
Tipperary	€2,212,494
Waterford	€2,081,929
Westmeath	€1,734,644
Wexford	€2,859,391
Wicklow	€1,367,958
Total TVRS Expenditure	€58,678,341

Regeneration Projects

497. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the expenditure to date under the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund; the extent to which the fund has attracted local indigenous support; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38974/21]

498. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the number of participants currently benefitting from or likely to benefit from awards made by her Department under the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38975/21]

502. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development her plans to build on the success of her rural regeneration plans in all areas throughout the country; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38980/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 497, 498 and 502 together.

The Rural Regeneration and Development Fund (RRDF) forms part of the wider rural regeneration and development programme which also includes the Town and Village Renewal Scheme and the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme.

In terms of both RRDF Category 1 (Major Projects) and Category 2 (Seed Funding), funding of €249 million has been approved to date for 164 projects worth a total of €338 million. The total spend to date in relation to these projects is €70.74 million.

The projects supported by the RRDF are coordinated and integrated projects which involve co-operation between public bodies and communities, philanthropic funders or the private sector. The recently completed third call for Category 1 projects provided funding up to a maximum of 90% of the total project cost with at least 10% provided in matching contributions by the applicants. Matched funding may be in the form of a combination of wider Exchequer and/or State sector expenditure, Local Authority investment and/or land, community investment, philanthropic contributions, private sector investment (where appropriate), or other asset contributions. Match funding of €89 million has been committed to RRDF projects to date, bringing the total investment in rural towns and villages to €338 million.

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The projects funded under the RRDF are key to delivering on the objectives of Our Rural Future – the Government's five year strategy to revitalise rural Ireland. The most recent announcement in relation to the Fund was the completion of the third call for Category 1 applications in April 2021, with 25 projects emerging as successful and funding of €81 million allocated. These large scale ambitious projects will deliver local and regional benefits, supporting sustainable communities, economic development and job creation. I announced the third call for Category 2 applications in May 2021. The closing date for applications is the 30th July 2021 at 12 pm. An application and guidance document is available on my Department's website.

Question No. 498 answered with Question No. 497.

Question No. 499 answered with Question No. 489.

Social Isolation

500. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the degree to which her Department continues to address the issue of rural isolation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38978/21]

501. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the extent to which she and her Department continue to address the issue of urban isolation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38979/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 500 and 501 together.

Addressing the issue of isolation, in both urban and rural communities, is relevant to the work of a number of Government Departments. This is reflected in ongoing Government work including that aimed at enhancing community policing, rural transport links and tackling social inclusion. Focus on actions to address the issue of isolation in communities has become more important than ever due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many of my Department's policies and funding programmes contribute to addressing isolation issues in communities.

Key interventions include funding the **Seniors Alert Scheme**, which enables older people to live securely, with peace of mind, in their homes through the provision of personal monitored alarms, ensuring contact is maintained with those who are vulnerable. In addition, as part of the Department's **COVID-19 Action Plan**, increased support was provided for older people through our funding partnership with ALONE for their crisis telephone support line.

The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) is Ireland's primary social inclusion funding intervention, delivered locally by Local Development Companies (LDCs) to help those in the greatest need access supports to enable participation in communities. LDCs have put in place various measures to ensure supports continue to be delivered to vulnerable and isolated people throughout the COVID-19 crisis. These include increased online supports, a "friendly call" maintain regular contact with older, vulnerable isolated people during COVID, and an increase in Meals on Wheels services and supports for those not able to travel to shops and those experiencing food poverty.

The National Social Enterprise Policy aims to enable **social enterprises** increase their social, environmental and economic impact. Many social enterprises are based in rural or isolated areas and provide services to communities that may not otherwise be available.

The **library service** operates a network of mobile libraries which provides an invaluable service for library users in rural communities, providing inclusion and connection to many remote areas. The vehicles offer books and other library items along with free Wi-Fi access. The library service also provides members with free online access to thousands of eBooks, eAudio-books, magazines, newspapers and training courses.

The current **LEADER Programme** functions under EAFRD Priority 6 – promoting social inclusion, poverty reduction and economic development in rural areas. This provides the basis for LEADER to address challenges facing Irish society including social exclusion. The Social Inclusion Theme is composed of the sub-themes Provision of Basic Services Targeted at Hard to Reach Communities and Rural Youth.

The sub-themes focus on providing basic services to communities in remote areas which may be at risk of social exclusion and also promoting youth entrepreneurship and associated training in order to improve improved pathways for young people to access economic opportunities in rural areas.

Physical and social isolation can have a particularly significant impact on people living in remote rural areas. Earlier this year my Department published **Our Rural Future**, a rural development policy for the next five years. The policy seeks to strengthen and build resilience in our rural communities and deliver a range of policy measures in order to achieve these objectives.

I have also introduced a new CLÁR Innovation Measure targeted at piloting new ideas which address specific challenges faced by communities in CLÁR areas, including isolation, population change, social disadvantage and marginalisation. This Measure provides a great opportunity for communities to identify the specific challenges they face and to come up with innovative ways to address them.

The issue of isolation is one which concerns us all and I am committed to continuing my Department's response to this issue through continued delivery of relevant programmes and policies.

Question No. 501 answered with Question No. 500.

Question No. 502 answered with Question No. 497.

Departmental Schemes

503. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the extent to which she can foresee further development and expansion of the town and village renewal scheme with a view to maximisation of beneficial impact; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [38981/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Town & Village Renewal Scheme is designed to assist with the rejuvenation of rural towns and villages throughout Ireland, making them more attractive places to live, work, and socialise.

Under the Scheme, funding of over €93 million has been approved for the delivery of over 1,340 projects in towns and villages countrywide. The Scheme continues to evolve as could be seen with the introduction of an accelerated measure under the scheme last year to quickly assist towns respond to the challenges presented by the pandemic.

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This year, in line with Our Rural Future, a key focus of the scheme is to renovate derelict and vacant buildings in our town centres to bring them back into use as multipurpose spaces, remote working hubs or as residential accommodation. I have increased the maximum grant available under the Scheme this year to €500,000 to permit projects of additional scale to be funded.

I also allocated an additional €5m for investment in digital hubs under the scheme as part of a Connected Hubs fund. This will support the development of Ireland's first national network of remote working hubs and fund small scale capital works in existing hubs and Broadband Connection Points.

I am confident that the scheme will continue to develop and expand in the coming years in response to evolving needs.

Question No. 504 answered with Question No. 488.